

HIGHER EDUCATION QUALITY AUDIT IN ETHIOPIA: ANALYZING THE METHODS AND PROCEDURES

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Abstract

The main purpose of this study was to explore the practice of higher education quality audit in Ethiopia and the problems being encountered in the course of action. Specifically, the study attempted to examine the employed methods and procedures used by the Ethiopian Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency, HERQA, in assessing the quality of public higher education institutions.

In view of the nature of the research topic, qualitative research method was used. Both documentary analysis and interviews were conducted in approaching the formulated research questions. While the Higher Education Proclamation, specifically the provision related to the establishment of HERQA, and the guidelines developed by the agency for undertaking institutional quality audit were analyzed, interviews were conducted with some of the experts of the agency. Data collected through interviewing were analyzed using the ad hoc meaning generation method as proposed by Kvale (1996).

The findings of the study in general showed that the methods and procedures used to assess the quality of higher education by external experts were in line with the general model of higher education quality assessment where institutional quality audits were conducted based on the institutions' self evaluation reports. However, the findings showed that the agency itself was highly engaged in quality audits as its experts constituted 40% of the external evaluation expert groups.

Although the guidelines developed by the agency emphasized that institutional quality audit has the purpose of quality improvement, it was found that the accountability function was also demonstrated: audit results involved certain degree of judgment; institutional quality audits were mainly initiated by the agency; audit reports were to be accessible for the public; and highly standardized procedures were used. However, the results of the assessment did not have any purpose of ranking and accrediting of institutions. Besides, it did not have any adverse link with funding of institutions.

Higher education quality was defined 'as fitness for purpose' whereby quality of education in general is to be judged by assessing the extent to which the intended outcomes (graduates' achievements) are being achieved. However, the employed methodologies and procedures of institutional quality audit as well as the results of the assessment were not in a position to guarantee this purpose.

The findings of the study on the other hand showed that the course of undertaking institutional quality audit was faced with two major challenges; first, rigidity of the financial directives of the government with regards to payment for the services rendered; two, the leadership of some of the HEIs were less committed to the institutional quality audit.

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Higher education has always been considered as the major driver for socio-economic development of Ethiopia. Following the overall political economy as well as ideological change that took place in the country in 1991 from communist oriented and command economy to a more decentralized system and free market, significant reforms were made in the public sectors. Accordingly, a number of public policies have been formulated and put into effect.

Like other sectors, the higher education system was subject to reform with change of policies. The New Education and Training Policy and the Higher Education Proclamation were the two important policies adopted in the sector. While the New Education and Training Policy, promulgated in 1994, affected the whole sector of education in general, the Higher Education Proclamation, adopted in 2003, specifically addressed the higher education sector.

Both the Policy and the Proclamation were fundamental, among other issues, in redefining the relationship between higher education institutions and that of the state. They were instrumental in devolving power and authority away from the state to that of higher education institutions. As a result, there has been increasing trend of change from strict state ‘control’ to ‘supervision’ of the system. However, in turn, as happens in other parts of the world, there is an increasing need to steer the system from a distant in such a way that higher education institutions are being held accountable for their performance.

On top of redefining the relationship between higher education institutions and that of the state, the policy as well as the proclamation has been fundamental in addressing the basic higher education problems specifically related to access, relevance, and quality. As a prime agenda of improving access to higher education, a number of new public higher

education institutions were established as well as diversified private higher education providers entered into the market of higher education. As a result, the system has been expanding rapidly. Almost all of the private higher education institutions and many of the public ones were established in the past one decade. However, although access is getting improved, higher education participation rate is still one of the lowest in the world, less than 5% (Teshome 2005).

On the other hand, the fast expansion of the system with poor internal situation of institutions, among other things, raised wider concern about the quality of education. Consistent with such concerns, the outcome of consecutive policy implementation evaluation discussions made by the Federal Ministry of Education with Regional Education Bureaus and other stakeholders showed the potential decline of quality of education which in turn laid down the foundation for the establishment of the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Assurance Agency (HERQA) in the country (Teshome 2005).

Being directly accountable to the Federal Ministry of Education, HERQA has the mandate to ensure that higher education and trainings offered at any institution are up to the standard, relevant and have quality, and whether they are inline with the economic, social and other appropriate policies of the country. Besides, it has the responsibility of assessing private higher education institutions for pre-accreditation, accreditation, and renewal of accreditation permits. On top of this, it shoulders the responsibility to give information periodically to the public about current situation and status of the institutions (FDRE 2003 2257).

Although the practice is a recent phenomenon in the history of higher education system, the agency has been playing pivotal role in ensuring the quality of education since it was established. However, because of the rapid expansion of the system, particularly the private sector, the agency has been mainly devoted to assessing private higher education institutions aimed at pre-accreditation, accreditation, as well as renewal of accreditation

applications (Tesfaye 2007 16). It has also recently conducted the first round institutional quality audit on some public higher education institutions.

Although these are important developments, the agency is supposed to carry out its activities based on well established approach in accordance with the particular context of the country. In this regard, it needs to have well developed operational guidelines, and materialized methods and procedures that help ensure and enhance quality of higher education in a sustainable way. In addition, the agency has to provide technical guidance to institutions in managing the quality of their education. On the other hand, the adopted methods and procedures should equally be effective in tracing quality problems as well as in demonstrating accountability of the system in line with the particular situation of the country.

However, since the practice of higher education quality assurance by external expert groups is a new phenomenon in the country, much is not known about the implication of the employed approach, methods and procedures, in serving its purposes.

1.2 Research Questions

It is apparent that policy formulation is not an end by itself. Its implementation is equally, if not more, important. To this end, creating appropriate structure as well as designing and launching effective strategies that guarantee the achievement of policy goals are of paramount importance. In this regard, the national quality assurance agency has the responsibility to formulate strategies that help ensure the quality of education provided by any education institution.

Thus, in light of the fundamental issues raised in section 1.1 above, the research attempts to examine the practice of institutional quality audit in Ethiopia formulating the following central research question: *What are the approaches used by HERQA to ensure the quality of higher education in Ethiopia?* In order to answer this broad question, the following specific research questions were raised.

1. How is higher education quality defined in the context of Ethiopia?
2. What are the specific methods and procedures used by the agency to ensure the quality of higher education?
3. What are the challenges facing the agency in assessing the quality of higher education institutions?

1.3 Objective of the Study

The general objective of this study is to examine the practices of higher education quality assessment in Ethiopia and the challenges facing in the course of action. The study examines external quality assessment procedures and the extent to which the institutions and academics are involved with the activity. Specifically it has the following objectives:

1. describe the procedures and methodologies used by the agency in ensuring the quality of higher education institutions;
2. examine the major purpose(s) of institutional quality audit in light of the national context of the country;
3. Investigate the role of other internal stakeholders in institutional quality audit of public higher education institutions.

1.4 Delimitation of the Study

Organized and structured way of assuring quality of higher education by a national agency is a recent phenomenon in Ethiopia like that of most African countries. Therefore, as a new development, it is hardly possible to expect a fully developed and advanced system of higher education quality assurance.

Although the agency is young, it has been undertaking higher education evaluation particularly related to accreditation of private higher education institutions. Besides, institutional quality audit of public higher education institutions by external expert groups is being done quite recently. Thus, this research is delimited to the institutional quality audit of public higher education institutions mainly focusing on the agency.

1.5 Limitations of the Study

There were a number of limitations that had impact on the study. First, it was so difficult for the author to approach the research topic based on a well developed theoretical framework as theory on quality of higher education is generally deficient. Secondly, although there are a number of resource materials and studies made on quality of higher education in most of the other regions of the world, there are no adequate studies conducted in the case of Sub-Sahara African countries specifically in Ethiopia. Third, the initial idea and proposal of the study was to undertake comprehensive study about the system of quality assurance in the country incorporating the agency and both private and public higher education institutions. However, mainly because of time constraint the researcher was forced to narrow down the study to institutional quality audit and focus only on the public institutions. Even so, it was hardly possible to collect data traveling to Ethiopia.

1.6 Definition of Terms Used in the study

Institutional Quality Audit is (as defined by HERQA) an in-depth analysis and assessment of the quality and relevance of programs and of the teaching learning environment, and the appropriateness and effectiveness of a HEI's approach to quality care, its system of accountability and its internal review mechanisms (by external experts). In this study it is alternatively used with higher education quality assessment (evaluation).

Public Higher Education Institution refers to those institutions established by the government and run with public fund. It includes all such institutions that offer education at bachelor degree and above.

1.7 Structure of the Thesis

The study is organized into six chapters. The first part deals with introduction that includes background of the study, research questions, objective of the study, delimitation as well as limitations of the study, structure of the thesis, and definition of terms used in the study. Besides, short description about the socio-economic, cultural and geographic conditions of Ethiopia is presented.

The second chapter deals with the brief overview of the history of higher education in Ethiopia with special focus on the New Education and Training Policy and the Proclamation of Higher education and their impacts on changing the long existed relationship between the state and that of the higher education institutions. It also highlights the emerging trends with particular reference to the higher education.

The third chapter deals with the review of related literature on higher education quality assurance. The emergence of higher education quality assurance in general, and that of the specific case of Ethiopia, is described. Besides, the concept higher education quality, the scope of assessment, approaches to higher education quality assurance; internal versus external quality assurance and models of higher education quality assessment are addressed.

The research method employed in the study is dealt with in chapter four; where as, data presentation, analysis and interpretation of the findings of the study are dealt with in chapter five.

The last chapter provides detailed description of the summary of the study and the conclusion drawn. Propositions for further studies are also forwarded.

1.8 Short Description of Ethiopia

Ethiopia is geographically located in East Africa with a total area of 1,127,127 square kilometres. It is an ancient country with a history of more than 3000 years and having its unique alphabets (CSA 2006). The country has maintained its independence even during the time of colonial powers in Africa. It is a country with diverse ethnic and linguistic groups where over 80 different languages are spoken (MOI 2004).

Ethiopia is the second most populous country in Africa with a total population size of 75.1 million as of 2006 (MoFED 2007). The population grows annually at a rate of 2.62% which is estimated to be doubled in about 26.3 years (MoFED 2007). The age structure of the population is dominantly between ages 0-14 showing a huge future demand for social services including education.

The political system of the country is organized in the form of Federal Government. There are nine ethnic based National Regional States and two Administrative Councils.

Ethiopia's education system is currently structured as primary (Grades 1-8), lower secondary (9-10), upper secondary (11-12), Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) (10+1,10+2,10+3), and higher education that provides under graduate and post graduate study programs. While the Ministry of Education is the highest governing and regulatory body of higher education institutions, universities, Regional States are responsible for the TVETs. As of 2008, there were 21 public universities and more than 67 accredited private higher education institutions.

2 OVERVIEW OF THE ETHIOPIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

2.1 Historical Overview

Modern higher education began in Ethiopia in 1950 with the establishment of the then University College of Addis Ababa (Habtamu 2003; Saint 2004). Habtamu describes that the college had less than 1,000 students and 50 teachers most of which were foreigners. In the subsequent two decades time, other specialized technical colleges were also established so as to offer professional trainings in the field of ‘agriculture, engineering, public health, and teacher education’ (WB 2003 1). Later, most of these colleges were reorganized under Hailesilassie I University which is currently known as Addis Ababa University (Habtamu 2003). From the inception, higher education institutions had the function of producing skilled personnel that can run modern bureaucracy. Besides, they have been highly considered as an important instrument for the socio-economic development and modernization of the country through advancing knowledge and skills of the citizenry.

Although the country has never been colonized in its history, the education system in general and the academic structure of higher education institutions in particular had been influenced by more of the American and less of the British system (WB 2003; Saint 2004).

Higher education in Ethiopia has been elitist in its nature until recently. The majority of the school age population has not had access to higher education as the institutions were built in major urban areas of the country. For instance, the tertiary gross enrolment ratio (GER) that was only 0.2% by the year 1970 had not shown any significant improvement after twenty five years in 1995 (0.7%) which increased to only 1.5% by the year 2003 (WB 2003; Teshome 2005). In terms of Gender, available figures show that female

participation in higher education has been one of the lowest in Africa. Although the system is rapidly expanding, the demand for higher education is still high.

On the other hand, although the provision of higher education had been dominantly the responsibility of respective governments for long time in the past, a number of private providers has been entering into the market of higher education since the adoption of the New Education and Training Policy in 1994. Recently, the system is under the process of massive expansion by both public and private providers. For instance, the number of public universities which was only 2 until year 2000 increased to 11 by year 2006 and then to 21 by 2008. Where as, the corresponding number of accredited private colleges increased from 14 in year 2001-2003 to 64 in 2006 (WB 2003; Teshome 2005).

While the main delivery mode of education in both public and private sectors is in the form of regular day program, extension (evening) programs are also employed extensively. Besides, almost all private and quite few public higher education institutions provide distance education programs.

2.2 The Relationship between State and Higher Education Institutions: Retrospective

Ethiopian political ideology had been communist oriented form 1974 through 1991. The political structure had been formed on the basis of centralized system whereby every decision had been made by government authorities. As it had happened in other parts of the world (see for example de Boer and Goedegebuure, 2003), the state generally had been the sole regulatory and funding body of universities and colleges.

The relationship between higher education institutions and the state had been typically characterized by the sovereign steering model (see Maassen and Gornitzka 2000). Higher education institutions had been considered as an important instrument to attain and promote the government's socio-economic and socialist political ideology. To this end, the curriculum have been designed in such a way that the aims and objectives reflect

communist values and principles. Higher education institutions had not been autonomous and lacked academic freedom to make certain decisions on their activities. Rather, according to the World Bank (2003), the government had been ultimately intervening with universities' and colleges' internal affairs. Appointment of senior university officers as well as academic promotions had been controlled by the government (World Bank 2003). Besides, all academic staffs had been treated as civil servants and thus had been managed by the national agency/commission that was responsible for managing civil servants rather than by higher education institutions themselves (World Bank 2003; Ashcroft 2004).

In short, the government had been the sole regulatory body of HEIs with regard to degrees, access, quality, institutional management, personnel matters and other areas of administration. Generally viewed from the point of view of Clarck's (1983) coordination of higher education institutions in the country, the state had high degree of power to steer the system. Almost everything had been under the control of the state.

However, political, socio-economic, and ideological changes that took place in the country had re-shaped the relationships between higher education institutions, the state and that of the society. The political change from a highly centralized (communist) regime to a more decentralized form of governance accompanied with the change of economy from command to a free market model has necessitated the adoption of a number of reforms in various sectors including education.

In the Education sector, the promulgation of the New Education and Training Policy in 1994 and the adoption of HE reform in 2003 were important turning points where the roles of the coordinating bodies of higher education institutions were redefined. The provisions in these policies shifted significant portion of authority from the state to that of institutions, and also introduced an element of provider-consumer type of relationships between HEIs and students. On the other hand, they laid down the groundwork for the flourishing of private HEIs in the country.

2.3 National Education Policy Frameworks:

2.3.1 The New Education and Training Policy

The collapse of communism internationally and the overthrow of the Marxist government in the country in 1991 necessitated a new market oriented ideology that has been followed by a number of reforms in all sectors including education. Among these includes the promulgation of the new Education and Training Policy (ETP) in 1994. The policy was adopted so as to respond to the governments' new socio-economic development transformation requirement in all sectors. In this regard, Teshome (2004) has the following to say:

“Free market economic policies, improved environment for private investments, and the relatively better and steady growth of the economy, as well as openness to the world and the spread of information and communication technologies; have required more personnel with higher education and training.” p. 3.

The policy in general has addressed the education system as a whole with specific deliberations on each level. As clearly indicated in the policy document (TGE 1994), major emphasis has been given to the curriculum, educational structure, educational measurement and evaluation, teachers' training and development, educational support and inputs, educational organization and management, and finance.

Educational structure The higher education system of Ethiopia had been structured in a binary system composed of universities and national colleges (see Kyvik 2004 for such systems) that had been governed under the same regulation. While universities had been authorized to provide education at diploma (12 +2 or 12+3), and/or degree (bachelor, and/or masters, and/or doctoral) level(s), colleges had the responsibility to train only at a diploma level. However, with the introduction of the New Education and Training Policy, such a system has changed to a kind of 'dual' system where the previous form of college education has been transformed to the new structure of (regional) non-university sector specialized in technical and vocational trainings. Unlike the former colleges, such sectors

are accountable to regional states and have the responsibility of meeting local development needs of the society.

With regard to academic qualifications and study durations, diploma, undergraduate, and postgraduate (masters) degree programs required respectively a minimum of two (12+2), four (12+4), and eight (12+4+4) years of additional study after successful completion of 12 years of primary and secondary education prior to the promulgation of the New Education and Training Policy. However, later, while the duration of undergraduate degrees have been reduced to a minimum of three years of study (12+3), the duration of study at a postgraduate level (12+3+2) has been limited to two years of study program. Whereas the previous form of diploma that had been offered either by universities and/or by colleges has been abolished and a new structure of 10 +1, 10+2, and 10+3 certification has been introduced and offered by regional technical and vocational training colleges.

The curriculum The other focus of the policy was the curriculum at all levels of education. Accordingly, the policy has given emphasis for the review and revision of the previous curriculum with the intention of adapting it so as to meet the national societal, economic, cultural and geographical as well as global circumstances (TGE 1994). The policy further emphasizes that the ‘curriculum and learning materials need to be prepared based on sound pedagogical and psychological principles and are up to the national standard’ (TGE 1994:13). Besides, higher education offered at any institution should focus on experience and student participation, be practice oriented, and encourage independent thinking (FDRE 2003).

As a result of the policy framework and strategic development directions of the country, many and diversified fields of training programs both at undergraduate and post graduate levels have commenced. Habtamu (2003) confirms this by providing an evidence of the case of two universities where the number of new programs commenced has increased tremendously.

Governance and Management of Institutions One of the most important elements addressed by the education policy was the governance and management of higher education institutions. The policy has brought a major change in the governance and management of higher education institutions. The policy in particular provides high degree of autonomy and academic freedom to institutions. According to the Policy (1994), all educational institutions have become autonomous in their internal administration and in designing and implementing different training programs. It also provides autonomy to institutions to administer their finance and personnel including recruitment as well as in establishing relations with local or international counterparts (FDRE 2003).

The governance and management structure of higher education institutions encompasses from the lowest level of operational leadership at the department to the top level governance of the institutions. The Boards of each institution are the head of the general administration of the public higher education institutions; and are accountable to the Ministry of Education or to the appropriate organ of the regional government. Each board, according to the provision, should be formed in such a way that it consists of persons from the Ministry of Education or Regional Governments, representatives of the users of services (products) of institutions and renowned persons, and the presidents of institutions. Under the Board lie the Senates which are responsible for the overall management and leadership of their respective institutions. According to the higher education proclamation (2003), the Senates are responsible for preparing the institution's strategic plan, setting policy on academic matters, approving new courses, ratifying changes to the academic structure, awarding academic promotions below professorship, and for determining the type and amount of service charges. Each public university has also a president and two vice presidents each responsible for academic and administrative wings. The president and academic vice presidents are to be appointed by the government as per the recommendation of the board for term of a maximum of five years (FDRE 2003). Down the organizational structure goes deans of faculties/colleges/schools and department heads. Department heads and deans are supposedly to be elected by the academic staff of respective departments and faculties.

2.3.2 Higher Education Proclamation

Higher education proclamation was introduced in 2003. It addresses a wide range of basic provisions related to higher education institutions. The major provisions of the reform include administrative and financial autonomy of institutions, introduction of cost sharing in form of graduate tax, income generation and contracting out of services, and the allocation of block grant budgeting system to public HEIs using a funding formula. On top of this, it has also laid down the bases for establishment of two important agencies; namely, the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Assurance Agency (HERQA) and the Higher Education Strategy Center (HESC) (FDRE 2003; Teshome 2005).

Financing of higher education Until recently, financing of higher education has been the main responsibility of the government. Education for regular students in public higher education institutions has totally been free for a number of years (World Bank 2003). However, the introduction of higher education cost-sharing was necessitated in line with the established economic rationale of expanding access.

However, since cost sharing is at its younger stage in the context of Ethiopia, it is difficult to trace its impact particularly on improving the quality of higher education. Nevertheless, as empirical evidences show, it is unlikely that the introduction of cost sharing with the prevailing scheme has had a negative impact on student enrolment in higher education.

On the other hand, the way higher education institutions have been funded has changed from line item to block grant funding that gave the right to institutions to appropriate it among different activities and faculties/departments as per their needs.

Quality assurance The issue of quality of higher education has internationally become one of the prime agenda in light of the prevailing national, international and global dynamics. The Ethiopian Higher Education Relevance and Quality Assurance Agency (HERQA) has been legally established in 2003 as an autonomous body.

The agency has the responsibility for carrying out institutional quality audits by undertaking in-depth analysis and assessment of the quality of education. It has also the mandate to ensure the relevance of education and training programs offered at any institution and whether or not they are in line with the socio-economic needs of the country (FDRE 2003). It has also further responsibilities to assess the appropriateness and effectiveness of the institutions' approaches to quality care, accountability and internal review mechanisms. Institutions are also subject to establish their own mechanisms by which they can internally review the quality of education by themselves.

2.4 Emerging Trends

2.4.1 Quantitative Expansion of the System

As discussed above, the history of higher education in Ethiopia is not that old. The system had not showed much expansion until recently. However, since the past few years, the system has been undergoing massive expansion both in the public and private domains. The number of public higher education institutions (universities) that was only two until recently has now reached to 21. Similarly, while there had not been any private higher education sector for the past several years, there are now more than 67 accredited private providers in the country. This shows that the private sector is growing faster. In general many of these transformations took place within the past decade.

2.4.2 Increasing Private Initiatives

The expansion of private higher education institutions is apparent in most parts of the world. Although the expansion of the sector can be attributable to a number of factors, Altbach (2005) argues that the underlying reasons are related to massification and financing. An increased demand for access to higher education and the change of thinking about the financing of higher education, which is related to the change in concept from the traditional idea that higher education is a public good that has to be

provided by society to a private good, has been the major derivatives for the growth of private higher education. In other words, as put clearly by Geiger 1986 in Duczmal (2006), the emergence and expansion of mass higher education is the response to an increased demand for higher education and the incapability of public higher education institutions to accommodate the excess demand.

In line with the above general rationale, besides with national political and ideological changes, private higher education is rapidly expanding in Ethiopia. While the significant majority of the institutions are at a level of vocational college offering specialized trainings, there are few that offer full range of academic subjects and have reached at the status of University College. The sector is playing pivotal role particularly in creating access to higher education to the society. They are specifically providing study opportunities to those who would otherwise not be able to get a place at the public universities. The significant majority of private higher education institutions are for-profit-institutions.

All private higher education institutions are under the direct supervision of either the Federal Ministry of Education or Regional Education Bureaus depending on the level of training they offer; while degree awarding institutions are regulated by the Ministry, those that provide training lower than this level are under the supervision of the Regional Education Bureaus. However, before commencing their full operation, they are required to be accredited by a public accrediting body. Besides, they should get license from the Investment Office to enter to the market (Damtew 2005).

2.4.3 Concern for Quality of Higher Education

The issue of quality of higher education, as discussed in the literature, is a contemporary agenda worldwide. Provided with the rapid expansion of the system and with increasing demand of the society for higher education, on the one hand, and the concern for accountability, efficiency and effectiveness of the system, on the other, has brought into forefront the issue of concern for quality of higher education institutions. For instance, in

the case of Sub-Sahara Africa, the Materu's (2007) study of the sector confirms that there has been an increasing raise of concern about quality of higher education due to rapid growth in enrollment amidst declining public fund; the proliferation of private providers; and increasing pressure from the rapidly transforming labor market. This in turn has raised national concern for the need to ensure and enhance the quality of education among other things.

As part of Sub-Sahara African country, Ethiopia has also been experiencing similar challenges. Although an agent for ensuring quality of higher education has been legally established, the concern for quality of higher education is seemingly still high as it is often the point of discussion even in the public media to mention the least.

3 LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Emergence of Higher Education Quality Assurance

Assessment of quality of education has been an important issue since the early days of higher education institutions (Vught & Westerheijden 1994; Schwarz & Westerheijden 2004). According to Dill (2003) while academic quality assurance in the publicly supported sectors in UK had been carried out by professional self-regulation until the 1980s, it had been state regulated in the case of continental European countries like France and the Netherlands. Where as, in the case of US, the market has been influential in regulating academic quality of higher education institutions. However, the issue of quality assessment of higher education has become an agenda for discussion (debate) in many countries of the world since 1980s (Vught and Westerheijden 1994; Dill 2003).

The emergence of quality assurance in higher education is attributable to a multitude of interrelated factors (Vught and Westerheijden 1994; Brennan and Shah 2000; Henkel and Little 1999; Van Damme 2004; Vroeijenstijn 1995; Dill 2004). First, the growth of social demand for higher education followed by massive increase in student enrollment accompanied by diversification of the system has raised concerns for the potential decline of quality of education. Second, according to Barnett (1992), the need to expand the system in response to the growing social demand with reduced unit cost per student, as a result of budget limits, raised governments' concern to assess higher education institutions in terms of its 'efficiency and effectiveness'. He argues that the tension between the expansion of the system on the one hand and budget limits or lowering unit cost per student on the other has created quality gap (Brennan and shah 2000; Damme 2004) that necessitated the need for quality assessment of higher education. The third factor is related to deregulation of the system and corresponding rise of evaluative state that demands for 'value for money'. The change in steering of higher education institutions from strict state control to a supervisory/evaluative model has devolved

power to institutions which in turn demands institutions for public accountability to their performance (Damme 2004). The fourth reason is associated with the 'extrinsic qualities' (Vught and Westerheijden 1994) of higher education institutions: services institutions provide to the society. According to Damme (2004), the incapability of higher education institutions to satisfy the qualitative and quantitative needs of the society has led to loss of confidence on the traditional academic education quality management capacity of the institutions.

3.2 The Concept of Higher Education Quality

'The concept of quality is not new' and 'it has always been part of academic tradition' (Vroeijenstijn 1995). Nevertheless, quality of higher education is a highly debated, complex and multi-dimensional concept (UNESCO 2006; Cave et. al 1997; Damme 2004; Brennan 1997). Harvey and Green (1993) also emphasizes that it is hard to articulate quality despite there could be intuitive understanding. Although the term is widely used, there is no single, universally agreed on definition of the concept (Damme 2004; Csizmadia 2006). Consistent with this idea, Stensaker (2004,) also emphasizes that it is still difficult to find agreement on the exact definition of quality though the concept has become central organizational variable in higher education since mid 1990s. The definition, according to Vroeijenstijn (1995), is rather a matter of negotiation among stakeholders.

The difficulty in defining quality of higher education, among other things, emanates from the nature of higher education institutions themselves (UNESCO 2006). First, there is no consensus on the exact objectives of higher education institutions. In this regard, four dominant conceptions of higher education are discussed by Barnnet (1992 17-19). (i) higher education as the production of qualified manpower. This conception counts students as 'products' or 'outputs' as having utility value on the labor market; and thus, quality is considered as the function of the ability of students to succeed in the world of work (p 18); (ii) higher education as a training for a research career- this definition is advocated by the academic community and thus quality is conceived in

terms of research profiles of the staff; (iii) higher education as the efficient management of teaching provision- this definition of higher education focuses on the throughput process which is related to the efficiency of institutions; (iv) higher education as a matter of extending life chance-this is a conception that 'higher education is valued of its ability to offer opportunities to potential consumers to participate' in the institutions (p. 19). Second, it is difficult to precisely know what exactly determines the quality of the output of the system since it is hard to grasp the interaction between inputs and throughputs. Third, in light of diversity of institutions and courses offered and with the heterogeneity of student population, the conception of quality is diverse. In other words, 'what might seem adequate definition of quality for one institution or stakeholder might be inadequate for the others' (UNESCO 2006 15-16).

The conception of higher education quality has been addressed in the literature from different point of views. Cave et al. (1997), referring Kogan and Joss (1995), provide specialist, systematic and generic concepts of quality. On the other hand, Harvey and Green (1993 11-27) provide five groupings of discrete but interrelated ways of conception of quality: quality as exceptional (linked with excellence, highest standard or elitism), as perfection or consistency (zero error), as fitness for purpose (meet customers' needs), as value for money, and as transformative (empowerment of students or the development of new knowledge) (see also Harvey 1995; Green 1994). The difference in these conceptions seems a matter of emphasis either on the intrinsic and/or the extrinsic values of higher education institutions. On the other hand, Pollitt & Bouckaert (1995) level these conceptions into output and process oriented views. While the output oriented view conceives quality as value for money, stakeholder satisfaction and zero errors; the process oriented view encompasses quality as transformative. To Henkel and Little (1999 225), 'higher education has its traditional language of quality reflecting notions of standards, of academic coherence and progression of attainment and understanding' which is 'not readily communicable to people outside the discourse of the specialist discipline'.

In short, the above conceptions indicate that quality of higher education meant different things to different stakeholders: students, families, academics, employers, and funding agencies. That is why quality is often referred to as 'relative' term. Harvey and Green (1993 10) discuss two senses related to relativism. The first conception is related to the users of the term by variety of stakeholders of higher education and 'the circumstances in which it is evoked'. In other words, different stakeholders have different conceptions of quality (Wong 2001; Frazer 1994; Westerheijden et al. 1994; Preedy et al 1997; Brennan 1997), and even the same person can have different conceptions of quality in different circumstances (Harvey and Green 1993). The second is the 'benchmark' relativism of quality which refers to the different absolutist conceptualizations of quality: while quality is absolute to some, others view it in terms of absolute thresholds that have to be exceeded; and even contrary to this, others conceptualize it in a way that there is no threshold by which quality is to be judged.

Taking into account the previous practical experiences, Damme (2004) argues that the definition and conception of quality are oscillating among various dimensions. According to him

"The 1980s and early 1990s witnessed a movement from excellence to fitness for purpose. The late 1990s witnessed a correction to this movement, first to the basic standards approach and next to more consumer satisfaction-oriented approaches" p. 133

On the other hand, in light of recent focuses on higher education there seems a tendency to define academic quality as academic standards that reflect the value added on students in terms of knowledge, skills, and attitudes as a result of their engagement in higher education (Dill 2003; Frazer 1994).

The discussion made above leads to make a conclusion that quality of higher education is not static, rather it is dynamic and expresses itself in continuous innovation (Bruggen et al. 1998), and defining the concept in a particular context requires considering the needs and interests of various stakeholders.

3.3 Purposes of Quality Assurance

Ensuring higher education quality serves different functions though the degree of emphases differ from country to country. Quoting Weusthof and Frederiks 1997, Schwarz and Westerheijden (2004) list four main functions of quality assurance systems: accountability, quality improvement, validation, and information. Accountability in their context refers to informing the society (in particular the state) about the status of quality of education delivered by higher education. Trow (1996 310) also defines it as ‘the obligation to report to others, to explain, to justify, to answer questions about how resources have been used, and to what effect’ (see also Harvey and Newton 2005). Validation on the other hand has to do with legitimizing judgments; and that of information is related to transparency that refers to provision of information to stakeholders so as to help them make rational choices (Schwarz and Westerheijden 2004 20). More or less similar to the above category, World Bank 2003 (in UNESCO 2006 13-14) also provides different functions of quality assurance systems that include assessments related to the initial opening of programmes and institutions (commonly called ‘licensing’ and leading to the status of a publicly recognized entity); supervision of the current functioning (including supervision of administration and finance); accreditation (ensuring stakeholders that minimum standards are being met (Massy 1997); professional certification of graduates in chosen professional fields; and the provision of information on the recognition and accreditation status of both institutions and programs. Generally, in spite of the fact that quality assurance programs aim to serve a variety of purposes (Harman 1998), accountability and improvement functions are more emphasized in the literature.

Accordingly, the point of analysis in a particular setting addresses whether the quality assurance system attaches more emphasis on the accountability or on the improvement functions; and/or how the system maintains balanced emphasis between the two orientations. To this effect, depending on particular circumstances, the degree of focus on either of these functions may vary. For instance, Schwarz and Westerheijden (2004) argue that it would be appropriate to focus on the accountability and compliance aspect of

quality assurance in circumstances that are characterized by ‘rapid growth of unregulated private higher education’ or when ‘addressing the introduction of new types of institutions or qualifications’ (p. 20); where as, in a system of higher education where effective internal quality assurance scheme is in place, it would be appropriate to focus on the improvement side of quality assurance. From this point of view, it is possible to deduce that while accountability oriented quality assurances are often linked with external quality assessment, improvement oriented assessment is associated with internal/institutional self-regulated review. In line with this, Massy (1997) has the following to say:

“Accountability generally provides the proximate motivation for externally-organized assessment, while improvement provides the motivation for institutionally-initiated assessment. However, accountability goals generally include improvement as an indirect benefit and internal assessment processes can be used as an element of accountability.” (p. 7).

The above statement also reveals that one form of assessment has an implication on the other in a way that assessments aimed at one purpose of quality assurance can directly or indirectly have an element of impact on the other. This implies that quality assessment with the aim of accountability has also an element of improvement and vice versa (Thune 1997). However, it is argued in the literature that rigid application of accountability-oriented quality assessment from external agent would rather lead to compliance leaving no room for innovation and improvement.

3.4 Scope of National Quality Assurance

This refers to mapping of the kind of institutions and or programs that are subject to undergo through the process of external evaluation in the national system of higher education quality assurance. Stated differently, the scope of quality assessment signifies the levels of assessment to be incorporated in the process. The levels of assessment could be institutional (that may include both public and private higher education institutions, university and non-university HE sectors), faculty/department, subject/programme or individuals (Brennan and Shah 200). The scope can be determined by the interplay of a

number of factors. However, Campbell and Rozsnyai (2002) argue that the ‘size and shape’ of the higher education system is the most crucial factor in determining the scope of quality assurance.

Practices in this regard are different from country to country. According to Brennan and Shah (2000), however, the most common levels of quality assurance are subject/programme level or whole institution and sometimes a combination of both. They further elaborate the focuses of assessment at each level as follows (pp 55-56):

- i) Program level - usually includes structure and organization of the course, teaching and learning objectives, academic staff details, library and other learning resources, information technology, student progress and achievement, staff development and internal quality assurance mechanisms.
- ii) Whole institution level – includes institutional systems(mission, governance, management, quality assurance, finance and physical resources), quality of education(aims and objectives, assessment methods, student achievement, employability of graduates, research and scholarship, qualification and experience of teaching staff, learning resources, accommodation, student support services), quality of research (number of publications, facilities, external funding, collaboration with industry).

Related to the scope of assessment is the question of the condition of assessment. In other words, although experiences vary from country to country, assessment of institutions, programs, etc can be voluntary or compulsory on the basis of specific legal issue. To this effect, in countries where it is compulsory, every new program or newly established institution that is special interest to the state is subject to education quality assurance procedures. In contrast to this practice, where it is voluntary, the decision to undergo through evaluation procedures is left to institutions or specific programs (UNESCO 2006).

3.5 External versus Internal Quality Assurance

Assessments of quality of higher education are often addressed in the literature as an internal and external quality assurance procedure. Kalkwijk (1998 20) defines external quality assurance ‘as the action of an outside, preferably independent, body to assess the quality of performance of a university or a part of a university’. More specifically Vlăsceanu et al. (2004 44) define it as higher education quality ‘assessment procedure regarding the quality and effectiveness of the academic programmes of an institution, its staffing, and/or its structure, carried out by external experts (peers)’. Nevertheless, variations in the review are apparent with regards to the ‘source of authority of peers, types of peers, their selection and training, their site visits, and the standards to be met’ (Vlăsceanu et al. 2004 44; see also Brennan 1997). External review takes place based on institutions’ self-assessment report and its function can be related to controlling, accountability, or improvement (Kalkwijk 1998). However, Bruggen et al. (1998) argue that accountability and improvement are the dominant functions. ENQA (2005 14) also underlines that higher education quality assessment can be undertaken by external agencies for a number of reasons including the following;

- safeguarding of national academic standards for higher education;
- accreditation of programmes and/or institutions;
- user protection;
- public provision of independently-verified information (quantitative and qualitative) about programmes or institutions;
- improvement and enhancement of quality.

On the other hand, internal quality assurance of higher education, often also referred as self-evaluation or internal quality management, is defined as ‘the entire set of measures that the management of the university (higher education institutions) or part of it takes to assure the quality of education’ (Kalkwijk 20). Unlike the external quality assurance, it is entirely oriented towards improvement of education.

Certain key elements can indicate whether the national system of quality assurance is more of accountability or improvement oriented. Bruggen et al. (1998) underline that stress on self –assessment, peer evaluation, operational recommendations, and absence of direct link to financial consequences of evaluation results are some of the elements that constitute improvement. Where as the elements that indicate emphasis on accountability includes meta-evaluation and a follow up by government or a governmental agency, assessment conducted by independent experts, and public reports. However, although there are common features with regard to the national systems of quality assurance, significant differences are also apparent in the purposes and methods employed specifically ‘the balance between accountability and improvement, the focus of review (whole institution, subject level, teaching, research or a combination of these), and the ownership of the system’ (Shah 1997 205). In their study of national quality assessment systems in Nordic countries, for instance, Smeby and Stennsaker (1999 4) have identified six indicators used to evaluate the balance between improvement and accountability orientation of assessment. The first one is related to the presence of an independent agent and the extent of its function other than administration and co-coordinating national evaluation. Who initiates and decides the subjects (units) to be evaluated constitutes the second indicator. It will be more of external affairs if the purpose of quality assessment is control or accountability. The third indicator the authors used is the ‘standardization of the methods and procedures used’ (p.4). Quality assessments targeted to improvement and institutional development should allow the institutions to ‘adjust the procedures to fit their own needs’ (p.4) otherwise the controlling function dominates. The fourth one is about the nomination and appointment of evaluators. Improvement oriented assessments need to attach the responsibility to institutions or units to be evaluated. The fifth indicator is whether there are other types of quality assessment systems, like the presence of national database, which, according to the authors, would impact on the improvement side of quality assessment. The last indicator is related to the follow up of the assessment results. Accordingly, improvement oriented assessments attach shared responsibility between an agent and the institutions themselves.

3.6 Standards and Indicators

The process of evaluation involves the development and use of certain elements or a general framework of reference against which a subject of focus is to be measured, judged, validated, and or compared. As part of the general broad concept of evaluation, quality assurance in higher education also requires setting basic level of performance of institutions/programs, measuring achievements, and making statements about the level of achievement. Underlying through all these procedures come the concept of standard, criteria, indicators, benchmarking, etc.

Like to that of the concept of quality, these terms are also argumentative in the literature of higher education. Despite this fact, although the researcher is more interested on how such terms have been defined and formulated in the national context of the research area, it is important to shed light on the concepts of the terms.

3.6.1 Standards

Are qualitative and or quantitative statements that denote the expected level of requirements or conditions that must be achieved by higher education institutions or programs. Therefore depending on the general definition of quality of education, standard could be the minimum threshold level or the highest level of excellence in which institutions and/or programs are supposed to conform with (UNESCO 2006; Hämäläinen et al. 2004). According to Vlăsceanu et al. (2004), standards could take inputs, processes and outputs as reference points.

However, a number of critical issues can be raised regarding the formulation and determination of standards. The first point is related to the technical aspect. In other words, standards must be formulated clearly and explicitly if the quality of education is to be properly judged (Vlăsceanu et al. 2004). However, it is very difficult and complex to set such standards. The second issue concerns the question of who is in charge of or rather have the say in determining the standards. Although experiences vary from country

to country (see Campbell & Rozsnyai 2002), for instance the agency can determine standards after consulting all the constituencies, or higher education institutions can formulate them. Nevertheless, as pointed out by Hämäläinen et al. (2004 22) standards in general should be formulated in such a way that they ‘provide for stimuli for change as well as for the quality of institutions and programmes’.

On the other hand, like to that of the notion of ‘quality’, the term ‘standard’ is also liable to different conceptions. Regardless of this, ‘all standards do have a normative function whether they provide consistent scales and measures, regulate action, set limits or facilitate comparisons’ (Lassnigg & Gruber, 2001 in EUA 2008 11). To this effect, all actors and institutions need to have an agreement and common understanding on the construct of standard itself if quality assessment has to meet its objectives.

3.6.2 Indicators

Standards convert into operational parameters called indicators. The Glossary of Terms and Definitions defines it as follows

“Operational variables referring to specific empirically measurable characteristics of higher education institutions or programmes on which evidence can be collected that allows for a determination of whether or not standards are being met.” (p 37)

Indicators can be formulated in such a way that the parameters indicate specifically the context, inputs, processes and outputs. On the other hand, it is common in the literature that performance indicators are also used to measure the extent to which a higher education institution is performing.

3.7 Models of Quality Assessment

Quality in higher education has been on policy agenda for more than two decades. Depending on the purposes and specific circumstances, different approaches and methodologies, have been employed to assess the quality of higher education (Harman 1998). The differences, according to Brennan and Shah (2000 12), specifically lie on ‘who assesses what, how and how often’ and in cases where assessment is characterized by the presence of both internal and external assessment, distinctions take place on ‘who has the last word’ (p. 12).

Nevertheless, in the literature of higher education quality assurance, the most commonly discussed approach of quality assessment is the general model developed by Vught and Westerheijden (1994). Drawing from experiences of different countries the authors came up with the model having the following four elements (pp. 365-369). Jeliazkova & Westerheijden (2001) confirms that, although not all, most of the national systems of external quality assurance are based on this model.

1. Managing agent(s) - this is a national body that has the responsibility to manage the system of quality assurance at a meta-level. The agent should play the coordination role of quality assessment system being independent from government politics and policies, but have its legal basis, and ‘not having the task to impose upon the institutions and approach that the government deems to be necessary’ (p.365). In consultation with the institutions of HE, the agent should play its coordinating role by formulating procedures and formats that can be used by the institutions. Based on his own practical experience in external quality assessment, Vroeijenstijn (1995 44-45) points out specific roles of an agency which includes information and guidance for the self-assessment; composing the review committees; instructing and training of the committees; training and counseling of the secretaries; organizing the visits and backing the process; and publishing the report. On the other hand, Woodhouse (2004 80-81) mentions the feature and tasks of the external agency as indicated below.

- has an explicit and relevant mission;
- evinces independent, impartial, rigorous, thorough, fair and consistent decision-making;
- carries out its assessments in relation both the institution's own self-analysis and to external references;
- respects institutional integrity (and autonomy), while being supportive of the institutions;
- includes, informs and responds to the public;
- demonstrates public accountability by reporting openly on its institutional review decisions;
- (if an accreditor) has explicit minimum standards, and distinguishes between accreditation(threshold) and extension (improvement);
- makes public and explicit policies, procedures and criteria;
- has adequate and credible resources, both human and financial, with appropriate provision for development;
- is economical and efficient;
- carries out self-review, based on data-collection and analysis, including consideration of its own effects and value;
- has its own quality systems that emphasize flexibility and quality improvement;
- collaborates with other EQAs;
- provides for appeals against its decisions.

Taking into account various practices, Brennan and Shah (2000) reveal that such an agency differs from country to country in terms of its legal status and ownership (there are instances where they are collectively owned by HEIs themselves), functions, composition and sources of funding. And the authors conclude that irrespective of the legal status of an agency, the methods it employ 'represent a compromise between what governments want and institutions are prepared to accept' (p 56).

2. *Self-evaluation, self-study, self-assessment*- the central idea of this element is that the academics are the most crucial determinants for the success of quality assessment at institutional level. According to the authors (1994 366), the system will be successful if only ‘the academics accept quality assessment as their own activity’. They must ‘trust and own the process in which the problems are defined and solutions are designed’ (p 366). However, the authors also recommend that it is of paramount importance to consult outside actors in the process of self evaluation.

3. *Peer Review*- this element of the general model constitutes one or more site visits by external expert groups composed of various stakeholders from different sects. Depending on the level and content of the assessment, members of the review group need to have specific backgrounds on the content of evaluation. On the other hand, the authors indicate that this group of ‘experts should be accepted by the institutions to be visited as unbiased specialist field’ (p. 366). The peer review should give an opportunity to institutions/faculty/department to discuss about the self-evaluation report and ‘the plans for future innovations’.

4. *Reporting*- The final results of quality assessment must be reported. However, it should not have the function of judging or ranking institution (or faculties or departments) visited; rather, it should aim at helping them improve the levels of quality of their education. Thus, the authors (p. 367) emphasize that visited institutions should be given the opportunity to comment on the draft version of the report; besides, they ‘should be able to indicate their possible disagreements’ with the reviewing team.

Reporting the results of the assessment process is also an important element in providing accountability to stakeholders. In doing so, two possible ways having their advantages and disadvantages are discussed by the authors. The first possible way is to publish the complete report and avail it to all who are interested in it. The other way is to offer detailed report only to the institutions visited and to guarantee confidentiality.

The final point related to reporting the results of the assessment is related to its implications either to positive or negative sanctions specifically related to funding. They recommend that the results of the assessment can serve as one important input into the policy process leading to funding decisions; other wise, ‘rigid and direct’ application of the results of the assessment report to ‘negative sanctions’ has the danger of leading to compliance culture by the institutions. Nevertheless, Westerheijden & Maassen (1998 33) emphasize that ‘something has to follow after the external evaluation of quality (follow-up), otherwise is just a-literally- useless ritual’.

This model generally points out the stages involved in the process of external quality assurance and the actors that involve in the course of action at each level. The model is also fundamental in a way that learning can take place by individual actors and institutions in the process of implementation if the national system is designed ‘with a built-in-facility for learning and change’ (Jeliazkova & Westerheijden 2001 1). Otherwise, the scholars quoting Jeliazkova & Westerheijden (2002) warn the danger of ‘diminishing returns of repetition’ saying the following:

“Once the ‘easy wins’ have been made as a result of a successful first round of evaluations, a second (unchanged) round of evaluations cannot add as much quality improvement or accountability as the first did. Routinisation, bureaucratisation and window dressing are dangers lurking behind this” (p.434)

Very similar to the above model, Harman (1998 348-349) also outlines an approach for management of quality assurance. The approach encompasses both the structures responsible to carry out the assessment and some specific details and focuses of the assessment that includes i) the responsible agent or unit (both at national and institutional level); ii) participation in the review process (whether voluntary or compulsory, or voluntary with some degree of external persuasion; iii) methodologies of the assessment; iv) focus (both at national and institutional level); v) purposes of the assessment (accountability, or improvement, or combination of purposes); and vii) report and follow up activities.

The other model of quality assurance of higher education is the 'phase model' which is fundamental to analyse systematic variations with the general four stage model explained above. The model is recently formulated by Jeliazkova & Westerheijden (2002) taking into account mainly the internal and external dynamics of quality assurance systems. It 'describes the phases in the development of quality assurance schemes in relation to social issues regarding higher education' (Westerheijden, Hulpiau & Waeytens 2006 5). The assumption of the model is that 'quality assurance schemes operate in a social and policy contexts' (Westerheijden, Hulpiau & Waeytens 2006 5) in which certain issues or quality problems are dominant, and these issues stand in a loosely hierarchical order that can be 'best addressed through different quality assurance systems' (Jeliazkova & Westerheijden (2001 3). In this regard, Westerheijden, Hulpiau & Waeytens (2006) have the following to say:

"Once a more basic problem has been 'solved' to a degree that is satisfactory for the policy discourse, the next problem often already emerges. However, as long as a basic problem has not been 'solved', it is often useless to try to address a more esoteric one." (p.5)

The summary of the phase model is indicated in a table form on the next page as proposed by the authors.

The table below provides the summary of the phase model as presented by the authors.

1 Problems	2 Role of quality assurance	3 Information base	4 Nature of external review
Phase 1: Serious doubts about educational standards.	a) Identifying sub-standard educational programs.	Performance indicators, Descriptive reports	Summative; accreditation, checking standards. Report to state.
Phase 2: Doubts about the efficiency of the higher education system and/or institutions.	a) Public accountability. b) Creating quality awareness in institutions.	Descriptive / strategic reports (self-selling.) covering: a) performance, b) procedures.	Ranking of institutions. One report to state and institutions. Identifying good practices
Phase 3: Doubt about innovation capacity and quality assurance capacity of institutions.	Stimulate self-regulation capacity of institutions. Public accountability.	Self-evaluation reports about: a) procedures, b) performance.	Audit report to: . the institution . the state
Phase 4: Need to stimulate sustainable quality culture in institutions.	Split between: . improvement based on self-regulation; . public accountability	Split between: . self-evaluative reports about processes and strategies based on SWOT and benchmarking; . self-reporting about performance indicators	Split between: . audit report to the institution; . verifying data to be incorporated in public databases.
New challenge: Decreasing transparency across higher education systems.	Market regulation, i.e., informing clients (students, employers).	Performance indicators about products. (knowledge and skills of graduates).	Publication of comparative performance indicators. Standardised testing of graduates?

Source: Jeliazkova & Westerheijden 2001 p.3

4 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This chapter deals with the methodological issues. It specifically addresses the research method used in the study; the selection of cases; the procedures used in the study, the methods employed to collect data; and reliability and validity of the data.

4.1 Research Method

It is discussed in chapter one that the objective of the study is to examine how institutional quality audit is being conducted in Ethiopia, and also to explore the challenges facing the Agency in the course of action. So as to meet these objectives, the research methodology was carefully designed.

The researcher deliberately chose qualitative research method than quantitative research methods as the former is the appropriate method to inquire, understand and describe the methods, procedures and practices of higher education quality assessment at the national context. The method enables to draw unquantifiable but rich, that is, comprehensive and in-depth, data that help to deeply understand the phenomenon (Anderson 1998). Besides, the method is quite important to draw the attitudes and feelings as well as experiences of those who have been involved in and responsible for higher education quality assessment.

4.2 Selection of Cases and the Procedures Used

Literature in research methodology identify two major techniques of selection of cases: the probability and non-probability techniques. While the probability sampling techniques are more suitable to quantitative researches, the non-probability techniques are appropriate to qualitative research methods. While probability sampling techniques are mainly characterized by drawing samples from large population on equal chance basis, samples in the non-probability techniques are often selected deliberately by the

researcher based on well formulated criteria (Blaikie 2000; Oppenheim 1999; McMillan & Schumacher 1997).

Under these two broad categories of techniques, a number of specific techniques can be used to select cases or units that are appropriate to the research problem. The most discussed techniques in qualitative research methods are purposive, convenience, snowball samplings. Although all these techniques are appropriate to different specific research problems, it is of paramount importance for the researcher to analyze the extent to which these techniques enable to generate quality data and reliable results under the specific context of a research problem. Convenience sampling is a technique where the researcher selects subjects that are most accessible to him/her. On the other hand, purposive sampling is a technique where the researcher selects samples based on specific judgments.

To this end, the researcher employed purposive non-probability technique to select interviewees for the study at least for the following two major reasons. First, the technique was appropriate to select the interviewees whose responsibilities in the organization, HERQA, were related to the research topic in addition to having been involved in the process of higher education quality assessments; secondly, the number of individuals involved in the process of external quality assessment of higher education was very limited.

The procedure involved in the selection of individuals for the interview included the following activities. First, the organizational structure of the agency was reviewed and officials were consulted so as to identify the appropriate interviewees. It was found that the agency had a unit/team in its structure which was uniquely responsible for higher education quality audit. The team had a total of four personnel whose responsibility was directly related with higher education quality audit. Once this was done, attempt was made to identify if there were experts in other units of the organization that were knowledgeable and involved in the process of quality audit. To this effect, another

official was identified. In sum, a total number of five appropriate individuals were identified.

The second procedure involved selecting individuals to take part in the interview. However, although the total number of identified individuals was within the scope of the interviewing capacity of the researcher, it was needed to scrutinize it further based on some criteria for the purpose of getting quality data. Hence, two criteria were set: two or more years of work experience in the agency on positions related to quality audit and practical exposure in the process of higher education quality audit. The assumption behind these criteria was that data produced from such individuals would be of high quality and credible. Nevertheless, all of them met the criteria set.

Similarly, certain procedures were followed in the process of data collection. Once the individuals for the interview were identified, preliminary attempt was made to familiarize them with the objective of the study. Meanwhile, so as to get the permission to conduct the interview, an official paper was produced from the University of Oslo, Institute for Educational Research, and faxed to the agency. Finally, the identified individuals were communicated individually for their permission to take part in the interview. While one of them was not willing to take part, it was possible to get the consent of the remaining four.

4.3 Sources of Data and Methods of Data Collection

The use of multiple sources of data and research methods is quite important to explore the research problems from different angles (Cohen and Manion 1994). On top of enabling to generate rich data, such an approach is believed to enhance the validity of the study.

In general both primary and secondary sources of data were used in the study. Primary data were collected from experts working for HERQA through interview as explained above; where as, various documents, publications of the agency, the proclamation of

higher education related to the establishment of higher education relevance were used as secondary sources of data.

With regard to data collection methods, two specific techniques were used in the study. These were interviewing and document analysis. They are discussed below.

4.3.1 Interviewing

One of the prerequisites for undertaking interview is preparing interview guide questions. To this effect, a guide questionnaire was prepared in advance. The questionnaire consisted of semi-structured questions so as to guide the interview. Semi-structured questions were preferred as they give flexibility to the researcher to modify, explain, omit, or include certain questions in the context of the conversation (see Merriam 1998; Robson 1993).

As highlighted above, the selected interviewees were communicated by the researcher via telephone calls. However, though willing to provide data for the researcher, only three of the selected individuals were willing to be interviewed via telephone. The remaining individual was rather willing to be interviewed face-to-face. Therefore, while three were interviewed via telephone calls, the other was interviewed face-to-face by a recruited doctoral student at the Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia, after being oriented about the objectives and intentions of each guide question. It was necessary to conduct the interview via telephone as the researcher fall short of time to travel to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

The interview in general took from fifty to sixty minutes. In addition to taking notes by the author, all interviews were recorded after getting permission from the interviewees. Anonymity was also granted to each of the interviewees. On the other hand, the interview was conducted in Amharic language, which is the official language of the country.

4.3.2 Document Analysis

Documents are important sources of information in qualitative research. Accordingly, document analysis was employed as a method of data collection in the study. Relevant documents were identified and collected by the researcher in advance. The main documents used in the analysis include the higher education proclamation, publications of HERQA as indicated above.

4.4 *Validity and Reliability*

4.4.1 Validity

Two types of validity are addressed in the literature: internal and external validity. Internal validity deals with the question of to what extent the findings of the research match or accurately represent the reality or the phenomenon under investigation (Merriam 1998; Bush 2002). Bush proposes some methods that help to enhance internal validity as indicated below (P 66).

- Carefully choosing data sources and data generation methods;
- Recording decision making processes during the research;
- Carefully designing the interview questions in order to avoid subjectivity and bias;
- Using triangulation of data sources and data generation methods;
- Recording most of the interviews and verifying the author's interpretations of the meanings of the interviewee's answers by using interpreting questions during the interviews;

As discussed above in the first sections of this chapter, the researcher has employed most of these methods. The implication is that the internal validity of the research result would be high.

On the other hand, external validity takes into account if the result of a study could be generalized to the wider population. Although the literature poses questions about the external validity of qualitative research results, the findings of this study reflect the general phenomenon of higher education quality audit endeavors in Ethiopia. This is because that; first, the study focused on the agency which was the only exclusive institution that had the legitimate authority for ensuring quality of higher education in the country; second, data were collected almost from all experts whose responsibilities were directly linked with quality audit; third, almost all available and relevant documents were analyzed.

4.4.2 Reliability

Reliability of a study refers to the extent to which similar findings would be obtained if the same research problem is repeated or studied by others using exactly the same procedures that were previously used (Gall et al. 1996; Merriam, 1998; Yin 2003). Reliability in social science qualitative researches is challenged given the fact that human behavior is not static and other phenomenon keep on also changing. Nevertheless, although time lapse may have its impact on the reliability of the study, the procedures followed and research methodologies employed ensure the reliability of the study.

5 ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF DATA

This chapter in general deals with the analysis and interpretation of data. The chapter includes three major sections. The first section deals with the method of analysis of data collected through document analysis and interview. In the second section, presentation and description of data are addressed. In the last section, data are analyzed and interpreted based on the presentation and descriptions made on section two.

5.1 Method of Analysis

It is indicated above that both interview and document analysis were used as sources of data for the study. Pertaining to the qualitative nature of the research, qualitative techniques of data analysis were used in the study. As described by Anderson (1998 105), qualitative data ‘are analyzed in interpretative ways whereby the researcher makes judgments’ and ‘interpret meaning within a particular context’.

With regard to analyzing qualitative data collected through interview, Kvale (1996 188-204) also provides different methods and techniques of analyses that include meaning condensation, meaning categorization, meaning structuring through narratives, meaning interpretation, and ad hoc meaning generation.

Meaning condensation is an approach whereby the researcher abridges the meanings, ideas, feelings expressed by the interviewee into a shorter and briefer form by rephrasing it in a few words (ibid 192). As the name suggests, meaning categorization is a method of analyzing qualitative data by categorizing long statements into a reduced form of simple categories like symbols, or numbers, or scales (ibid 192). Meaning structuring, according to Kvale (1996 192), focuses on drawing the structure and plots of stories told by the interviewee, or creates ‘a coherent story out of the many happenings reported throughout the interview’ if there are no stories told. Analyzing interview data using the approach meaning interpretation ‘goes beyond a structuring of the manifest meanings of a text to

deeper and more or less speculative interpretations of the text'(ibid 193). Such an approach is more likely to involve text expansion unlike the technique of categorization and condensation. Where as, according to Kvale (1996) the ad hoc method of generating meaning is an eclectic way where a variety of commonsense approaches and techniques are used for generating meaning. In such approach, 'no standard method is used for analyzing the whole of the interview material' (ibid 203).

In light of the nature of the study, the ad hoc and meaning interpretation methods of data analyses are employed. Because such approaches were appropriate to describe, interpret, and draw meanings from the data pertaining to the particular context of Ethiopia. In doing so data on each issue are first recapitulated, and then analyzed and interpreted. Reflections on each issue are also forwarded.

5.2 Data Presentation

5.2.1 Description of HERQA

Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA) was established with higher education proclamation (No. 351/2003) in 2003 as an autonomous organ having its legal personality. Being directly accountable to the Ministry of Education, the agency was established with the objective of supervising the relevance and quality of higher education offered by any institution in the country.

The agency is governed by a board composed of members from the Ministry of Education (chair person); the associations of public and private institutions; chamber of commerce; notable educationalists as assigned by the Ministry of Education; and the director of the Agency.

The agency has head office in the capital, Addis Ababa, and runs its activities by state budget. However, as indicated in the proclamation (351/2003), it has the authority to generate service fees from institutions as approved by the Ministry of Education and open

branch offices in the regions within the country. It is the only legal body in the country which is in charge with overseeing higher education relevance and quality. Its specific powers and duties that are related to quality of education include the following:

- Ensuring that higher education and trainings offered at any institution in the country are up to the standard, relevant and have quality;
- Evaluating higher education institutions at least once every five years with a view to ensuring whether such institutions are up to the standard and competent;
- Supervising the standards and competence of the institutions;
- Giving information to the public about the current situation and status of the institutions periodically;
- Gathering and disseminating information about the standards and programs of study offered by foreign higher education institutions as well as about their general status
- Evaluate the relevance and quality of the institutions and their programs;

5.2.2 Institutional Quality Audit Procedures

It is indicated in chapter two that most countries follow more or less the same model of higher education quality assessment although there are certain variations in its application and intended purposes. Similarly, higher education quality audit in Ethiopia was conducted in line with the established model. Although there were detailed activities and specific procedures being followed, the overall process of quality audit can generally be grouped under the four general model of higher education quality assessment as developed by Vught & Westerheijden (1994).

According to HERQA's Publication Series 010 (P. 4), institutional quality audit generally follows the specific procedures as indicated below:

- HEI carries out an institutional self evaluation and prepares a self evaluation document;

- HEI sends HERQA its self evaluation document and informs HERQA of their wish to have an institutional quality audit;
- HERQA and HEI agree a date for the institutional quality audit;
- HERQA establishes an external institutional quality audit team in consultation with the HEI;
- HERQA institutional quality auditors make a one-day briefing visit to the HEI;
- HERQA issues a quality audit report;
- HEI prepares an action plan to enhance quality and relevance

However, information obtained from the interview indicates that there is a preliminary crucial stage that should be considered as part of the overall procedure in the process of institutional quality audit; which is the initiation for undertaking quality audit. Although all HEIs in the country are by law subject to external education quality audit, the initiation to undertake quality audit emanated from the agency itself. In this regard, the interviewees explained that the Agency writes an official paper to a HEI intended to be audited stating that the institution has to conduct self evaluation and submit the results of the assessment document to the agency within six months. However, as confirmed by some of the interviewees, there were instances that considerable number of institutions failed to reply within the given deadline. Besides, it was confirmed that institutions can not reject the request of the agency.

Institutional self evaluation conducts as per the guideline produced by the agency (HERQA Publications Series-013 2007). The guideline provides detail descriptions of self evaluation procedures and how to carry out institutional self evaluation. As indicated in the guideline (ibid P.5), institutional self evaluation comprises five procedures: establishing a team for the self evaluation; compiling and communicating a timetable for the self evaluation; gathering and analyzing information for the self evaluation; reporting the self evaluation; and making use of the self evaluation.

In forming self evaluation teams, the guideline advises institutions to establish an evaluation team having members drawn from senior managers; experienced staffs from

two to three faculties; representatives from administration, student support services and student body; and from staff responsible for quality assurance at the institutional level if there is any. It further recommends the inclusion of representatives from employing agencies and recent graduates of institutions. On the other hand, in line with external quality audit, the focus of evaluation and method of data collection are also outlined. According to the guideline, the sources of information include analysis of documents, statistics, surveying of facilities, observation of teaching, interviews, administering questionnaire survey, and written comments.

With regards to the purpose of institutional self evaluation, the guideline (ibid) gives more emphasis on improvement side of quality audit than accountability. The guideline states the following with regard to self evaluation.

“in carrying out a self evaluation it is important that a HEI does not interpret the task as just a search for weaknesses. Indeed, a possible starting point could be an assumption of high quality and a search for evidence to support or negate this assumption. Those who carry out the self evaluation need to be alert to good practice, to document this and to explain why they have taken this view. It is also important that limitations and constraints to improving quality and relevance be identified so that plans to try to overcome these can be prepared.” P.4

On the other hand, as a basic requirement for undertaking external quality audit, HERQA has prepared and issued to HEIs detailed guideline on how to prepare a self evaluation document (see Document No. 6 on page 89). On top of providing specific details on how to carry out the self evaluation, the guideline also specifies the content, format, and style of writing the document, including the page length. According to the guideline (ibid) the result of the evaluation document contains six basic contents. The first provides description about the general profile and historical background of the institution. This includes its mission, vision; organizational structure, governance and leadership; description of academic programs and other statistical information. The second part of the document focuses on schemes how an institution manages the quality of its education provision at various levels, whereas, part three focuses more on how the quality management schemes are put into effect. Section four specifically indicates judgments the evaluation team passes with regard to the system of ensuring and the quality and

relevance of education provided by an institution. The last two sections focus on good practices and the plans for the enhancement of processes and practices consequently. More importantly, the last section of the document clearly indicates the strengths and weaknesses identified and the necessary steps to be taken so as to build the strengths and remedy the weaknesses.

Once the agency received the self evaluation document from institutions, it undertakes two preliminary major activities before carrying out quality audit. Firstly, it consults the institution to be evaluated about the specific dates when the audit should be conducted. Secondly, the agency forms an evaluation team having five members. As a formal procedure, while three of the members of the audit team are selected from the pool of trained auditors, the remaining two will be experts from the agency itself (see Document No. 3 on page 91). It was explained by the interviewees that there are academicians that were selected from HEIs in the country and trained (by the agency) on how to conduct institutional quality audit. Then, the agency sends the list of selected auditors to the HEI for further scrutiny. If an institution has evidence based objection to the involvement of a particular member(s) in the audit team particularly related to 'conflict of interest', that particular person(s) may be substituted by another member(s) but the proportion of composition of the team from the agency and from externals remains the same. According to HERQA (see Document No. 3 on page 91), conflict of interest implies if any of the proposed members of audit team has been unsuccessful applicant for a post at the HEI to be audited, or are research partner or rival, or have relation or are personal friend of a member of staff. However, irrespective of any reservations made by the HEI, the agency has the final say in deciding on the members of the audit team.

Once formed by the agency, the audit team critically examines the self evaluation document submitted to the agency by a HEI. However, before the audit team undertakes the auditing activity, the agency makes one day briefing visit to a HEI. The purpose of the briefing meeting, according to HERQA (ibid), is just to explain to the HE community (president; key staff responsible for quality assurance at an institutional level; dean and department heads; staff; and student representatives) about the audit procedures and basic

requirements for undertaking the audit. Besides, the briefing visit is intended to answer any queries if the HEI has any. As explained above, the briefing visit is conducted by the agency, not by the auditing team. However, at least one member of the auditing team, often an expert from the agency, is required to take part in the briefing visit with the Agency.

On the other hand, the HEI assigns one staff as liaison to facilitate the auditing and serve as a contact person for the audit team while undertaking the assessment. Among other things, the auditing team consults the liaison to establish facts and clarify understandings (ibid) during the auditing visit. As was explained by the interviewees, the auditing team frequently communicates with the liaison officer until it finishes its auditing activity.

Once such preliminary basic conditions are in place, the audit team undertakes auditing of the quality and relevance of HE offered by an Institution. As briefed by the interviewees, the main purpose of the external auditing team is mainly to ‘validate’ the self-evaluation (document) prepared by the institutions themselves. With regard to the activity and purpose of the external auditing team, HERQA (ibid) has also the following to say.

“...the HERQA institutional audit team will seek to verify what the HEI has written in their Self Evaluation document, to compare their evidence and to judge the appropriateness and quality of the educational provision and the effectiveness of the quality assurance system. The team will also seek to evaluate the judgments of the HEI on the quality and relevance of its programs and on how it is enhancing the quality of its provision.” P. 7

In so doing, according to HERQA, the auditing process generally takes four days.

Auditing of quality and relevance of higher education in Ethiopia is conducted in general based on the following ten focus areas as identified by HERQA (ibid p 5).

1. Vision, Mission and Educational Goals
2. Governance and Management Systems

3. Infrastructure and Learning Resources
4. Academic and Support Staff
5. Student Admission and Support Services
6. Program Relevance and Curriculum
7. Teaching, Learning and Assessment
8. Student Progression and Graduate Outcomes
9. Research and Outreach Activities
10. Internal quality Assurance

The focus areas as well as the methodologies employed by the external auditing team are in line with that used during institutional self evaluation. In this regard, among the other methods explained above, the external quality audit team can also observe teaching in classrooms and, if necessary, sit in on meetings that are undertaken by institutions. In the course of undertaking its activities, the external audit team can principally operate either as one group or as sub groups (ibid). However, as briefed by the interviewees, the practice being held so far has been that the audit team has been performing its activities by sharing tasks among individual members of the audit team and then discusses the findings of individual members in group.

The audit in general focuses on educational inputs, processes and outputs. Under the general framework of the above ten focus areas, the auditing team selects one or more programs for evaluation.

The final stage of quality audit is reporting as indicated above. The process of developing the final audit report document passes certain important procedures. The first procedure involves discussion (among the auditing team) about the preliminary findings of the audit. This takes place immediately after the auditing team has finalized its evaluation activity. The purpose of such discussion is to verify the emerging judgments and to compile key points that are to be included in the audit report. The second procedure involves providing 'oral summary of the preliminary outcomes of the audit' (ibid p.9) to the president of the audited HEI. At this point, the president of the institution is briefed about

the overall view of the auditing team regarding the status of provision quality education by the institution. Besides, he/she will be informed about the nature of the recommendations the team is likely to make in its report about the HEI.

Then, HERQA develops the final institutional education quality audit report in such a way that it provides description and analysis of quality and relevance of programs and the teaching-learning, and appropriateness and effectiveness of institutional quality management systems. It also indicates ‘an element of good practice’ and recommendations for action (ibid p.9). According to HERQA (Ibid), recommendations are grouped into three clusters depending on the degree of urgency of the problem or on the priority actions to be taken as indicated below.

“....essential recommendations, advisable recommendations and desirable recommendations. Essential recommendations will be actions that need urgent attention to assure quality and relevance. Advisable recommendations relate to areas where there is the potential for quality or relevance to be at risk and where action is needed but not urgently. Desirable recommendations are actions which will help to enhance quality and relevance.” P.10

Before producing the final report, the agency sends the draft to the HEI audited so as to allow it ‘check’ for factual accuracy. However, there is no timeframe indicated in the guideline as to when the institution has to give its feedback on the report. On the other hand, if the HEI has any complain about the audit and/or about the behavior of any of the members of the audit team, it can appeal its concern to the director of the agency. If the HEI especially considers that such a case will have an impact on the audit result, the report will not be published until the matter is investigated; otherwise, the audit report will be published.

As indicated by the interviewees, external institutional quality audit has no link with budgeting or any other sanction.

5.3 Analysis and Interpretation of Data

In this section, data presented above are analyzed and interpreted. Analysis is made based on the literature reviewed in chapter two. Specifically, the method and procedures of quality audit in Ethiopia are analyzed using the general model of HE quality assessment. Besides, the phase model will be employed so as to examine the extent to which higher education quality audit is addressing quality problems based on the internal and external dynamics.

5.3.1 The Concept of HE Quality

The word quality of education and that of higher education is repeatedly used in different policies and other documents. The word is addressed in the documents without having been clearly defined. Rather, focus was made on how to improve the quality of education in general by improving certain basic factors. For instance, the New Education and Training Policy promulgated in 1994 attempted to show the impact of inputs on quality of education (TGE 1994 P.3&27). The policy also addresses the importance of decentralizing the educational management as a necessary condition to improve quality of education in general (TGE 1994 29). However, the term quality was not explicitly defined in this document and no provision has been offered to institutions or other bodies to define it.

On the other hand, the provision in the objectives of the higher education proclamation states that the institutions have to “produce skilled manpower in quantity and quality that serves the country in different professions” (FDRE 2003 P.2237&2238). Besides, it grants the right to academic staff of institutions to make comments on the quality and appropriateness of the teaching-learning process (FDRE 2003 2241). However, the terms ‘quality and appropriateness’ were not at all defined in the proclamation except that it is indicated as a target towards which HEIs are supposed to work.

In the strategic plan document of HERQA, it is also clearly indicated that the vision of the Agency is to ensure “a high quality and relevant higher education system in Ethiopia”. Although it is quite common in most performance reports, conference papers, and other documents that the term quality is used with prefix of qualifying words like ‘high quality’, and ‘good quality’, its precise definition was not indicated in those documents as well.

However, the working definition of quality of higher education (called working definition by the agency), seemingly at the national level, was somehow indicated only in the proceeding of HERQA where the presentations from the National Conference of the agency (see Document No. 3 on page 91) on issues of quality were compiled. In this document, the working definition of higher education quality was stated as “fitness for purpose” whereby the term ‘purpose’ signifying the relevance of education to the development needs of the country, employability of graduates, and relevance to the expectations of stakeholders.

It is also further elaborated in the proceeding that quality of higher education will be judged by assessing the extent to which intended outcomes are being achieved (ibid P 14); whereby the main intended outcome is referred to as the achievements of graduates’ of institutions. Except in this proceeding, the term quality is not defined or addressed in any policy document at the national level.

Quality definition needs to cater for continuous improvement of higher education in light of the dynamic national and global contexts.

Quality assurance is a new endeavor in the context of Ethiopia. Thus, commencing the practice requires prior clear formulation and common understanding of all the necessary concepts, and the elements that constitute it. Defining quality of higher education, among other things, helps to set a system level or institutional framework that guides action towards monitoring quality of education.

The definition of quality of higher education indicated in the proceeding of the agency is not however briefly emphasized. The starting point for launching education quality assessment should be having clear and well communicated definition of the concept of quality within the specific national context of the country, and specifying the elements that constitute “good” or “high” quality of education. Although such qualifiers are quite frequently used to describe the level of quality of education, there was no any benchmark set related to it.

The statement set in the working definition confirms that higher education quality is to be judged by assessing the degree to which intended outcomes are achieved. It can not be argumentative that judging the degree of achievement requires some standard or criteria against which the degree of success needs to be measured.

In the context of Ethiopia’s higher education quality audit, the term ‘standard’ is seemingly equated with the ten focus areas of institutional audit although there does not seem to be common understanding with the concept ‘standard’ between the agency and some of the HEIs. For instance, interviewees were asked to describe about standards, if there were any, used by the agency during institutional quality audit. One of the interviewees reacted to the question by posing another question.

“What are standards? What do you mean by standard? What we use in the process of institutional quality audit is only the ten focus areas of institutional audit. That is it! But ,in the process of auditing, we use the standard developed by the Ministry of Education which shows the proportion of teachers that should be available in institutions with different academic ranks, theory-practice combination, and the proportion of instructors time that should be allocated for research and teaching. Otherwise, there is nothing which is meant standard”

According to this interviewee, there are no as such explicitly set standards that serve as a benchmark or criteria against which the status of higher education quality of institutions is assessed. Rather, the ten focus areas were used as a reference point to undertake the evaluation.

So as to make further clarification, interviewees were asked to describe what sort of measurement (criteria, or benchmark, or standard) were being used since the result of institutional quality audit involves judgment. One interviewee responded:

“...for example, in evaluating the status of libraries, we only see how convenient and spacious the reading rooms are compared to the available number of students, its convenience for reading, etc. We judge it, for example, from these point of view; otherwise, we do not go into such details like how many books, old or recent, does the library have, how relevant and adequate they are, or what types of books does it contain.”

The statement made by the director of the agency, however, emphasizes the importance of having explicit standards and benchmarks so as to ensure the quality of higher education. According to him (see Document No. 2 on page 91), “explicit standards and benchmark statements and clear quality management procedures must be developed, implemented and maintained both at program and institutional levels ...” However, it was the ten focus areas for institutional quality audit that were explicitly described in the document where the above statement was made. This implies that standards are taken concomitant to that of the focus areas for institutional quality audit.

On the other hand, the understanding of institutions about standard seems different from that of the ten focus areas. For instance, regarding the interview question about the problems facing the agency in undertaking institutional quality audit, one of the interviewees mentioned a challenge related to standards as follows:

“...one of the problems we had been facing with is that some institutions repeatedly challenged us asking questions about our standards against which we measure the level of quality of education of the institutions. They pose questions saying that ‘what are your explicit standards in judging the quality of education?’...”

The statement indicates that the concept of standard to these institutions is different from that of the focus areas of evaluation. Seemingly, ‘standard’ for these institutions is that a certain level of established explicit criteria or benchmark against which the level of

quality of education is measured and comparison is made. This shows clearly that there is a gap in the conception of standard between the agency and some institutions.

The guideline for institutional quality audit provides details of reference points for each focus area of evaluation that has to be considered when undertaking institutional quality audit by external experts as well as by institutions themselves. Although it does not set a benchmark about each component, it gives a clear point of references for undertaking institutional audits. Thus, it is somehow possible to conclude that the standards used to evaluate the level of quality of education are imbedded within the ten focus areas of institutional audit in a broad way. Although there are a number of ways in which standards are employed, the basic question in here is that ‘would such an approach be effective in addressing the basic quality issues of the country provided with the contemporary internal and external dynamics of institutions?’ Besides, would the set ten focus area of institutional quality audit enable to reach judgments provided with the current definition of quality of higher education? This is another point for further investigation.

However, at least at this point, it is clear that the employed definition of HE quality as ‘fitness for purpose’, whereby ‘quality is to be judged by assessing the extent to which intended outcomes are being achieved’ (see Document No. 7 on page 89), implies that institutions develop precise and measurable objectives in terms of graduates’ achievement the success of which will thus be measured against certain specific criteria, or benchmarks. However, there had not been as such criterion based institutional audit conducted by the agency. This in turn shows that there is a considerable gap between the employed definition of quality of higher education and the methods and procedures employed to ensure the quality of higher education in the country.

5.3.2 Scope of Evaluation

It is discussed in chapter two that scope of external evaluation of higher education quality can generally take either at whole institutional level, or program level, or both at

institutional and program level. The decision on the level of assessment varies depending upon particular context of a country and the status of the HE system.

The scope is one of the fundamental issues that are crucial in fulfilling the purpose of HE quality assessment. This is because the results of quality assessment need to specifically show the status of quality of education of a particular institution or program or both. For instance, judgments and recommendation made about the status of quality of education of an institution based on evaluation of a certain portion of program(s) or subject area(s) may not be applicable to other programs that are not included in the assessment.

As clearly indicated in the HERQA's publications and as confirmed by the interviewees, the scope of higher education quality audit in Ethiopia is both at institutional and program level. At the institutional level, the effectiveness and appropriateness of quality care schemes put in place are assessed; on the other hand, the quality of programs and the teaching and learning environment is assessed. This implies that the scope of evaluation even within an institution is broad. However, as data presented above indicated, quality audit by external experts at program level focuses only on a few selected departments and fields of study within an institution.

Such an approach is less likely to reflect the education quality status of other departments or programs as the reports of the audit are produced at institutional level. For instance, undertaking observation of teaching in particular classrooms as a method of evaluation of quality of teaching can not be a reliable indicator for the teaching quality at a department or program level. For one thing, a single observation conducted in a few classrooms for a short time can not even lead to a conclusion about the teaching quality of the particular teacher/subject. Second, quality of teaching can be influenced by a number of personal and other circumstantial factors. Therefore, it is very unlikely that a short-time classroom observation would lead to comprehensive generalization. Third, although such an approach would be appropriate to certain cases and be more cost-effective, the quality of data and the preliminary judgments involved would be more liable to individual caprice who undertakes the observation.

In the context of Ethiopia where the system of higher education is not yet matured, and being featured by rapid expansion and increasing diversification of the system including the field of studies, making institutional quality audit on random selection of programs/departments/field of studies is less likely to critically address the quality issues. Besides, the credibility of quality audit results, specifically related to the teaching-learning processes, would be challenged.

It is obvious that each field of study would have its own specific quality problems and concerns. The stakeholders in general would also have their own quality concerns about specific programs. Therefore, quality audits must be designed in such a way that the scope of assessment meets the intended purpose.

Institutional quality audit that focuses on evaluating the effectiveness of schemes put in place by institutions to manage the quality of their education would be more fruitful in systems where such schemes are well developed and integrated in the structure of institutions. However, such schemes are not well developed in the context of Ethiopian public higher education institutions although they are under the process of being introduced. Although it is desirable that institutional quality audits take into account the internal quality management of institutions, much more emphasis should be given to programs. Because, evaluating the effectiveness and efficiency of an institutional quality management scheme, which is at an infant stage, is less likely to come up with crucial findings.

In general, the decision for the scope of institutional quality audit should take into account the external needs of the society as well as institutional realities. As argued by Vroeijenstijn (1995), the design for a system of education quality assurance depends on its purpose; and ‘when accreditation is not the direct purpose, an institutional assessment should be considered as the keystone of the programme-oriented EQA’ (p 25). In line with his argument, public higher education quality audit in Ethiopia was not found having

the purpose of accreditation. Therefore, though important to focus on both programs and institutions, much more emphasis and priority needs to be given to program evaluations.

5.3.3 Purpose of Quality Assessment: Accountability Vs Improvement

The data presented above showed that institutional quality audit in Ethiopia has the main objective of improving the quality of higher education. In this regard, institutional quality audit by external experts emphasized providing recommendations to institutions so as to enable them improve the level of quality of their education.

It is described by Massy (1997) that institutional quality audit aimed at quality improvement or accountability has certain element of the other and vice-versa. In line with this argument, although the guidelines and other publications of the agency state that the purpose of institutional quality audit is improvement centered, the study showed that the accountability element of quality assessment was also demonstrated in the process. Therefore, it would rather be appealing to analyze the extent to which the higher education quality audit endeavor is balancing the need between the two important functions in the context of Ethiopia. To this end, as indicated in chapter two, the balance between the two functions of HE quality assessment is analyzed by considering the role of the national quality assurance agency; who initiates and decides which field or unit is to be evaluated; the evaluation methods and procedures used; who nominates and appoints the evaluators; and the purpose(s) of evaluation reports (Smeby and Stensaker 1999).

With regard to guidelines, it is indicated above that one of the roles of the national quality assurance agencies in general must be developing clear guidelines for institutional quality audit. Consistent with this notion, HERQA has developed detailed and highly standardized guidelines of quality evaluation method and procedures for undertaking institutional quality audit. Although this is crucial in creating common point of reference in undertaking quality audit, the guidelines were highly standardized. For instance, the

contents of quality assessment as well as the procedures and methods employed were highly standardized.

Both internal and external quality assessment endeavors are supposed to be conducted in compliance with the developed standardized method and procedures. As argued by Smeby and Stensaker (1999), such a highly standardized approach limits the institutions' innovative and flexible approach of using different methods and procedures that best fit to address their internal needs. This reflects more of the accountability and/or controlling function of external quality audit than the improvement and institutional development.

The other indicator used to examine the balance between improvement and/or accountability functions of HE quality assessment was related to the question who initiates and decides which field or unit is to be evaluated?' It is indicated in chapter two (see section 3.5) that the accountability element of quality assessment dominates if such decisions are made by the agency. Two important questions had to be answered: first, who decides/initiates quality audit and institutional self-evaluations in general? Second, who decides which field or unit is to be evaluated?

It was confirmed by the interviewees that the initiation for conducting institutional self-evaluation and that of quality audit emanated from the agency itself, not from the institutions themselves. Audited institutions conducted self-evaluations simply because they were demanded by the agency to do so. But, in the case of self-evaluations, the agency had no role in deciding the fields or units to be evaluated. Unlike the self-evaluations, as a rule, it is the agency that decides the fields or units for evaluation in the case of institutional audit by external expert groups. Similarly, while institutions themselves form evaluation teams for undertaking self-evaluation, HERQA was mainly responsible for establishing the external expert audit teams. In doing so, the agency consults institutions while forming the audit team.

The other indicator used to analyze the balance between improvement and accountability functions of institutional quality audit is the employed national definition of quality of

higher education. In this regard, the national working definition set by the agency for assessing the quality of higher education was ‘fitness for purpose’. This, according to HERQA (see Document No. 7 on page 91), implies that HE quality is judged by assessing the extent to which intended outcomes of institutions are being achieved. In other words, according to this definition, institutional quality audit must evaluate the degree to which stated objectives of the institutions are met. The role of institutional quality audit is thus one way or another monitoring the level of performance of institutions which indicates more of accountability orientation than improvement.

The other important indicator used to analyze the purpose of HE evaluation was the purpose of the report. In this regard, the study showed that the reports of institutional quality audits did not have any purpose of ranking or accreditation. Besides, the result of the assessment did not have any link with negative sanctions. Rather, the reports were instrumental in informing the public and specific users of the reports about the status of the education quality of institutions. In addition to this, the reports had the main purpose of providing recommendations to institutions so as to help them improve the quality of their education provision.

It is generally apparent that both accountability and improvement functions of higher education quality audit by external experts is extremely important. Most literature on HE quality emphasize the importance of improvement function of audits. However, in a system like the case of Ethiopia, the accountability function of institutional audit is equally important to that of improvement. This is because that the public higher education system in general is characterized by, to mention the least, rapid expansion, diversification of fields of studies and increasing student enrolment that triggered concern about the education quality standard of institutions. In addition to this, the system is not yet fully deregulated and therefore the role of the market to influence the quality of the product is negligible. Thus, it is crucial that the institutional quality audits have the purpose of accountability specifically in ensuring the minimum quality standard of public higher education institutions.

5.3.4 Analyzing Ethiopia's Experience

In this part attempt is made to analyze the practice of Ethiopia's institutional quality audit based on the models presented in chapter two. More specifically focus is made on the general model. Besides, the phase model is used in analyzing particularly the role of the agency in addressing education quality problems of the country.

The first element in the general model of higher education quality assurance deals with the role of the agency that coordinates education quality assessment at a meta-level. HERQA's role is analyzed in comparison with the notions raised in the model. In this regard, the Ethiopian national higher education quality agency is a legally established body at the national level. Like all other civil service organizations in the country, the agency carries out its duties and responsibilities with the budget allocated to it from the government. Being directly accountable to the Ministry of Education, it performs its role under the general frame of government policies and regulations. In short, the agency was formed from the outset with the intension of implementing government policies related to higher education quality. This implies that it is less likely that the agency would be independent from government politics and policies.

With regard to involving other organizations in quality audit, neither the new education and training policy nor the higher education proclamation has any provision. Because of this, there are no any other private organizations, or associations that have the legitimacy to conduct institutional quality audits in the country. Rather, the higher education proclamation grants HERQA the sole responsibility to undertake evaluation of higher education quality.

Therefore, the coordination role of the agency at a meta-level was quite limited. Although there were a number of associations in the country organized by professions, the result of the study revealed that none of them were involved in higher education quality audits. On the contrary, the study revealed that the agency itself was actively engaged in undertaking

institutional quality audits. As it is indicated above, the experts from the agency constituted two-fifths, or 40% of the external audit team.

The other role of the national quality assurance agency, as indicated in chapter two, was related to the selection and training/orientation of the institutional quality audit teams, external experts. In this regard, the study showed that HERQA had a pool of trained academicians that serve as external quality auditors whenever there is a need for institutional quality audit. In so doing, the agency selected academicians from all higher education institutions in the country and provided them one week full time training on how to conduct institutional audit.

Such a practice would have an added value for respective higher education institutions in managing the quality of education. First, it is instrumental to win the commitment and full involvement of academicians in quality care endeavors. Second, as was explained by the interviewees, the academics were selected based on criteria that included experience, ethics, and academic rank (and qualification) from all higher education institutions in the country. This would have positive impact on building the credibility of the auditing team. In addition, this would give the academics the opportunity to appreciate the nature and complexity of the problem, which in turn may lead to improve policies, directives, procedures, and methodologies through research. Similarly, it is more likely that academics would positively influence their fellow partners, transfer best practices, and introduce change and innovation to their respective institutions.

The other point of analysis concerning HERQA was its role in formulating guidelines and procedures. The study showed that the agency has formulated different guidelines that have been used for both institutional self-evaluation and quality audit. The guidelines provide detailed description of the methodologies and techniques on how to undertake evaluations and organize assessment reports among other things. Although highly formalized, as argued above, such guidelines are fundamental in a sense that they provide clear direction and guidance on how to carry out higher education quality assessment, utilize assessment results, and consecutively work toward the development of

institutional quality culture. Specially, in the context of Ethiopia where higher education quality audit by external experts is in general a recent phenomenon in the history of higher education, developing and making use of such guidelines is of paramount importance for undertaking quality assessment as most institutions may lack the experience, including the knowledge and skills, on how to undertake quality assessments.

The second important element in the general model of higher education quality assessment is self-evaluation or self-assessment. In line with the central points risen at this stage of the model, Ethiopia's institutional quality audit can be analyzed raising the following fundamental questions. First, to what extent are the designed self-evaluation schemes important in gaining the commitment and acceptance of the academic staff in the institutions? Besides, being partly a member of the academic community, such schemes must also help in winning the commitment of institutional leaders and heads at different levels within the institutions, as such leaders are equally, if not more, important for the success of self-evaluation. Second, to what extent are the self-evaluations critical and genuine?

One of the major indicators related to the above basic questions is that who initiates for the self-evaluation. Institutions that are convinced of the benefits of quality assessment are more likely to take the initiation for quality audit by themselves. However, as discussed above, this was not the case. Although this can be attributable to a number of reasons, the underlying rationale is more related to the low level commitment of the leadership. For instance, it was clearly confirmed by some of the interviewees that some institutions were not in a position to reply to the agency's request (in time) to undertake self-evaluation as a preliminary requisite to undertaking external evaluation.

Strengthening this idea and showing the weak commitment of institutional leaders, one of the interviewees also had the following to say:

“in some of the institutions, the leaders did not give us (the audit team) any emphasis at all while we were undertaking quality audit in the institutions. They did not provide us the expected level of cooperation. But, when we sent them the

draft reports (after having finished the audit) for checking it up for any factual error, they became so concerned and tried to present this and that document as an evidence, which they never did while we were undertaking the auditing at the institutions”

Implying the same idea but expressing it in a different way, another interviewee also expressed the lack of commitment of the leaders of some of the institutions as presented below.

“After having had finished the write up of institutional audit reports, we sent them to the audited institutions for check up of any possible factual errors. While some institutions provided us with constructive feedback in time, others never even considered the matter seriously. They failed to give us feedback in time. We reminded them about it quite repeatedly, yet it was difficult to get their comments even long time after the expected period”

These statements imply that the leadership in some of the institutions was not fully committed and did not fully accept the evaluation as their own activity. To a certain degree, this might have something to do with the newness of the phenomenon. However, beyond this rationale, it has to be connected with the confidence and expectation of the leadership about the impact of the outcome of the assessment in bringing about change and improvement in the quality of education.

It can be deduced from the above quotes that things were done with external pressure from the agency. This in turn implies that these institutions carried out the activities only to fulfill the requirements of the agency. It is therefore less likely that the self evaluation would be critical and genuine in such a case whereby the leadership lacked the commitment for the audit.

However, the study revealed that the system launched nationally to carry out self-evaluation gives the opportunity for the academics to take part in institutional self-evaluations. It was the academics that constituted the significant majority of institutional self-evaluation teams. Similarly, as discussed above, the proportion of the academics within the external quality audit teams was also high. This is crucial in getting the academics convinced of and committed to the quality assessment. Nevertheless, it is

extremely difficult to empirically prove the correlation between participation of the academics in quality assessments and the degree of their commitment in such a study. However, with the context of multitude of complex internal and external problems and challenges of the HE system in the country, a number of factors deteriorate the confidence of academic staff and heads at different levels about the impact of quality audits. For instance, focusing on those factors that may deteriorate the commitment of the academic staff and institutional leaders, one interviewee expressed his attitude as follows:

“Students are assigned to institutions, faculties and departments beyond their intake capacities. And, it is common hearing from the university community, academic staff, heads at different level, complaining about this problem. Therefore, they consider that assessing quality of education is a vain exercise unless such problems are resolved”

On the other hand, so as to make the self-evaluation more effective, it is proposed in the higher education quality literature that outside actors be involved in institutional self-evaluation process. In this regard, institutional self-assessments in Ethiopia were fully conducted by academicians drawn from within the institution to be assessed. Besides, there had not been any experience that the institutions invited academicians from other similar institutions in the country or abroad to take part in the self-evaluation activity.

The third important component in the general model of HE quality assessment is peer reviewing by external experts. The Ethiopian experience of institutional quality audit is analyzed here from the perspective of the composition of the expert group (audit team) and the methods and procedures followed in undertaking the assessment.

It is indicated above that the external institutional quality audit teams were formed by the agency in such a way that three members of the team were academicians drawn from HEIs and the remaining two were experts from the office of the agency itself. According to the general model, the appropriateness of the composition of the review team, among other things, depends on the content of the assessment. In other words, in forming the audit team, it is crucial to make sure that the team members have the expertise in line with content of the focus areas to be evaluated. In this regard, the composition of the

institutional audit teams was limited to involving only the academics and the experts of the agency. However, the contents of the ten focus areas are so broad that require variety of expertise which necessitates the involvement of other constituencies like professional associations. On the contrary, although the agency had limited human resource capacity (it had only less than five experts whose responsibility was directly related to institutional quality audit), the experts of the agency were taking part in all institutional quality audits. This implies that the agency has been at the center of institutional quality audit which in turn raises the question of neutrality and freedom of the audit team from the government's influence.

Nevertheless, the opportunity given to the institutions to be audited by the agency to make comments on the composition of the proposed audit team, and allowing them to appeal if they have any objection against the participation of (a) particular individual(s), is very fundamental in establishing the acceptance of the external expert group as unbiased auditors. Such a practice, in addition to facilitating the review process, is of paramount importance in creating sense of involvement on the part of the institutions in the whole processes of quality assessment. Besides, as a beginner of the whole procedure of quality assessment, the briefing visit made by the agency before the dates of the external assessment helps, among other things, to clear up any confusion that may arise by the institutions.

Regarding the methods and procedures used, the institutional auditing team undertaken its assessment focusing on inputs, throughput, outputs, and research and outreach activities based on the self-assessment report. As indicated in the ten focus areas, Ethiopia's higher education quality assessment focuses both on evaluating the programs/subjects and the system put in place by institutions to take care of the quality of their education. In doing so, while whole institutional level of analysis was made on certain factors like vision, mission, goals, governance and management system, specific assessments related to teaching and curriculum development and/or improvement were made based on random selection of departments/subjects.

Although a number of factors would be attributable to the employment of such an approach, it is less likely that the result of such an approach would give a complete and generalized picture about the status of quality of education of the whole institution. This is because that each and every field of study has its own norms and beliefs different from others. For instance, observing teaching in certain classrooms can not be a good representative indicator about the quality of the teaching activities in the same faculty or department or institution.

In line with the general model of higher education quality assessment, the final stage of quality audit in Ethiopia is publishing the audit reports. Although it is stated in the HERQA publications that the aim of the assessment report is to give recommendations to higher education institutions so as to help them improve their education, it also involves judging of institutions particularly in pointing out their strengths and weaknesses. Although it was difficult to precisely indicate the influence of such judgment to the audited institutions, it was explained by two of the interviewees that some of the institutions were repeatedly raising the issue of the consequence of the judgment. This is because, as the practice of HE quality assessment by external experts is a new phenomenon, the institutions could not be certain about its immediate consequence and future long term effect as publication of the report includes the whole content of the audit.

It is argued by Jeliazkova & Westerheijden (2001) that audited institutions should be given the opportunity to comment on the draft audit report and clearly indicate their possible disagreement with the review team. In line with their argument, and as clearly indicated in the HERQA's institutional guideline, reviewed institutions were given the opportunity to check for factual errors on the draft report. However, beyond correcting the factual errors, creating a mechanism by which the institutions would give their comments about the whole process of the auditing and indicate their possible agreements and/or disagreements on the findings/results of the audit was not in place.

The other point related to the audit report is the issue of accountability. One of aims of publishing the results of quality assessment is to establish accountability on the part of

institutions by providing information to different constituencies about the status of quality of education. As highlighted above this is done by publishing the result of the quality audit mainly on the website of the HERQA (www.higher.edu.et) and by distributing the document to different agencies and organizations. Besides, reports are supposed to be published in HERQA publication.

Such an approach is fundamental in providing information to the society in general and to those organizations that are interested in the reports in particular. However, with the prevailing limited access to the internet, it is less likely that the significant majority of parents and students will be able to access the reports from the website.

The other important element related to the result of institutional audit is the consequences attached with it. Neither the higher education proclamation nor the other documents produced by HERQA or the Ministry of Education addressed the possible consequences of the outcome of the report related to sanctions. Nevertheless, interviewees were asked to brief the consequences of the result of the assessment, if there are any, especially related to funding of institutions. All of them replied that there has not been so far any established or clearly stated link between budget and that of institutional quality audit result. However, most of them were not certain about the practicability of this issue.

The critical question related to the consequence of quality audit results is that how institutions would fulfill their accountability in using the public funds where there is no link between quality assurance processes/results and public financing decisions for higher education institutions. Where there is no such a link, institutions may lack the means and incentives to implement quality improvement recommendations. Therefore, it requires devising some mechanism by which this gap will be filled up.

One of the purposes of publishing institutional quality audit reports is to inform the public particularly students and their families about the quality of education of institutions so as to help them make informed choices. However, as the system of HE in Ethiopia is not yet fully deregulated, students freedom of choice for a HEI is limited as

those who qualify for entry to universities are assigned by the government. In other words, higher education institutions have no vigorous role in selecting students (in undergraduate programs). The implication is that the impact of quality audit reports either in empowering students in making informed choices or in creating a sense of competition among the public higher education institutions is seemingly low. It means that the public higher education institutions are less likely to be influenced by students' choice so as to improve the quality of their education.

In general, it is discussed in chapter one that the fundamental derives for establishing HE quality assurance agency in Ethiopia was related to certain problems of the system particularly related to the decline of quality of education. As an all encompassing element, a number of quality problems can be identified in the system. However, as stated by Jaliaskova and Westerheijden (2001), an attempt to solve all quality problems at a time may not lead to the intended outcome. Rather, if progressive improvements need to be made, quality assurance systems need to address primarily the most pressing quality problems.

Analyzed based on the background rationale of the phase model, the Ethiopian higher education quality audit tries to address a number of HE quality problems at the same time. Quality audits according to HERQA are aimed at enhancing the level of quality of higher education in Ethiopia by improving efficiency and effectiveness, raising the innovation and internal quality assurance capacity of institutions, and by stimulating sustainable quality culture within the institutions.

In this regard, the fundamental question of standard of quality of higher education needs to be primarily addressed as a basis for advancing the institutions' innovative and quality assurance capacity; and subsequently build quality culture. This is of paramount importance particularly in a situation where the system is characterized by rapid expansion, diversity, increasing student participation, and where the public concern for quality of education is high. However, the study revealed that institutional quality audit by external auditors did not have the purpose of accrediting institutions or programs.

Although by proclamation the agency has the responsibility to ensure that the education and training offered by any institution are up to the standard, the public HEIs and their programs (all long existed fields of study as well as the newly established ones) have not yet been accredited at all. In other words, the initial point for institutional quality audit for public HEIs does not guaranteed the maintenance of minimum standard of quality of education by institutions in the form of accreditation.

An attempt of undertaking quality audit geared towards improving the efficiency, innovation as well as quality assurance capacity of institutions and building sustainable quality culture may be a futile exercise unless the basic issue of education quality standard is addressed.

It is repeatedly discussed in the previous chapters that quality assurance by external auditors is a new endeavor in the Ethiopian public higher education system. Thus, as a new development and as an egalitarian system that caters to more mass participation, the first round quality audits need to work toward addressing the most pressing problems of education quality and consequently lay down the foundation for further developments in establishing quality culture within institutions in the long run. Otherwise, it is most likely to have low effect and would rather remain repetitive action in each five years as quality audit is supposed to take place cyclically once in five years.

However, the higher education proclamation (FDRE 2003 2257) clearly indicates that HERQA has the responsibility of ensuring the standard of quality of higher education offered by any institution. Of the fourteen legitimate duties and responsibilities of the agency specified in the higher education proclamation, the three (see the first three statements on section 5.2.1) addresses the importance of standard of quality of higher education. This implies that the issue of standard of quality of higher education institutions is fundamental. Nevertheless, institutional quality audits were not in a position of addressing it through accrediting institutions and programs.

5.3.5 Challenges to Institutional Quality Audit

The term challenge refers to all those constraints that had adverse effect on the overall process of undertaking institutional quality audit. Depending on the particular context of a country, quality assurance agencies and institutions of HE may face variety of challenges ranging from major national policy issues to routine activities. According to Materu (2007) quality assurance systems in Africa are in general at an infant stage compared to their counter developed systems in other parts of the world and thus confront with many challenges. The source specifically mentions those challenges related to funding and availability of professional and technical staff in the national quality assurance agencies and highly qualified faculty members in the institutions of higher education.

In light of the above mentioned problems and others, attempt was made to investigate the challenges facing the agency in the process of institutional quality audit in Ethiopia. In this regard, interviewees were asked to mention the most prominent challenges. Some of the problems were related to the financial directives. Regarding this one interviewee had the following to say:

“The task of institutional quality audit is highly demanding. It is highly qualified university academics who constitute the majority of the audit team. They are the ones who earn a lot per month, get high salary. Being involved in such a demanding task; however, they are paid daily per diem in accordance with the Federal Civil Service Commission’s payment standard which is really not enough to cover even for one night bed rent leave alone for meal and other expenses. They have high grievance about it, and, often express their grievance saying ‘our motivation for taking part in the audit team is only because that we have to serve our country even for free; other wise....”

It is obvious that the legitimacy and credibility of institutional quality audit largely depends upon the professional competency, academic qualifications, experience and technical expertise of the external audit team members. Besides, the success of the audit depends, among other things, on their willingness in taking responsibility to serve as an external peer review member and dedication to the task. However, their dedication is more likely to get eroded in the course of time if the minimum level of their financial

expectation is not fulfilled. However, as confirmed by most of the experts, the challenge of institutional quality audit in Ethiopia was not directly related to financial shortage; it was rather related to the financial regulation of the system which sets limit that does not give certain flexibility depending on particular circumstances. The implication of this would be that the sustainability of continuing such a practice of undertaking institutional quality audit using highly qualified and professional academicians would get diminished in the long run.

It is apparent that quality audit in general incurs much cost in terms of finance. And, all the monetary costs involved in auditing of the public higher education institutions are covered by the government. However, provided with the limited financial capacity of the government, on the one hand, and with the rapid expansion of the higher education system, on the other, institutional quality audit results must at least pay the cost incurred in terms of the benefits derived from the outcomes of the assessment and the lessons learnt as a result of taking part in the whole processes.

On the other hand, the success of institutional quality audit largely depends upon the commitment of higher education institutions to conduct genuine and critical self – evaluation. The result of the self-evaluation document is fundamental as it constitutes the basis for undertaking institutional quality audit. However, as briefed by some of the interviewees, some HEIs lacked to provide high attention to the self-evaluation and thus fail to undertake it carefully. With regard to this, an expert says

‘There is a tendency of considering the task of quality assessment as the responsibility of an outsider body, which is the agency, by some higher education institutions. If we are going to bring change in the system, such conception must be halted.’

The possible reasons and outcomes of this can be interpreted in a number of ways. Firstly, institutions may lack the necessary awareness about the importance of undertaking such an assessment; secondly, although they have the awareness about it, they might be less convinced about the impact of the outcome of the assessment. If such a problem

continues to prevail, however, it is less likely that the result of institutional audit would add some value on the quality of education in general.

The analysis and discussions in section 5.3 indicated that the challenges of institutional quality audit are surfaced over the employed methods and procedures of quality audit. While some of the challenges were procedural, others were related to conceptual issues. Some of the prominent challenges are discussed below.

First, there were gaps in such a way that other constituents from professional associations, employing agencies, and the industry sector were not involved in institutional quality audits. Quality audits have been conducted with external auditors composed of only the experts of the agency and the academics drawn from higher education institutions. This leads to the argument that the issue of ensuring quality audit is still within the traditional realm of the academics in spite of the fact that the forms of evaluation take the nature of quality audit. Although it may be difficult to avoid the representation of the experts of the agency in quality audit teams, it would be more fruitful if HERQA plays more of coordination role by creating more favorable policy environment. Thus, the quality assurance system still has the challenge of creating a mechanism by which both self-evaluations and quality audits benefit from the experience and expertise of other national and international organizations if the higher education institutions have to be competitive.

Second, the question of standard is still important. All public higher education institutions in the country are established and run by government financing. Since they are the creation of the government, it seems that there is trust on institutions with regard to maintaining the minimum education quality level. However, scrutinizing the term standard of quality of education from its conception to application is another challenge in ensuring quality of public higher education institutions. If quality audits are not targeted toward ensuring the standard of quality of education, there has to be some mechanism by which internal quality management schemes as well as external quality audit procedures effectively track quality problems by themselves.

Third, higher education quality audit involves much cost in terms of time and money. The outcomes of the assessment should therefore have positive effect in improving the quality of higher education institutions in general. On top of this, it has to ensure certain degree of accountability. However, the study showed that maintaining the balance between the two is also another front line challenge for higher education quality assurance in Ethiopia.

6 SUMMARY OF THE STUDY AND CONCLUSION

This chapter provides first the summary of the study and then the conclusions made about the practice of institutional quality audit. Besides, some propositions are forwarded for further research.

6.1 Summary of the Study

Ethiopia established Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA) in 2003 with the objective of ensuring the quality of higher education institutions in the country. As part of its activity, the agency has recently conducted education quality audit on eight public higher education institutions.

The main objective of this study was thus to describe and analyze the practices undertaken by the agency in assessing the quality of education of institutions and also explore the problems encountered in the course of action. Specifically, the study attempted to examine the employed external quality assessment, institutional quality audit as used by HERQA, methods and procedures and explore the extent to which higher education institutions (academics) were involved with the overall process. In light of addressing these objectives of the research topic, the following basic research questions were raised.

1. How is higher education quality defined in the context of Ethiopia?
2. What are the specific methods and procedures used by the agency to ensure the quality of higher education?
3. What are the challenges facing the agency in assessing the quality of higher education institutions?

The author was motivated to study the subject of quality assurance of higher education mainly because there has been growing public concern about the quality of higher education in Ethiopia. In light of the above basic research questions, relevant literature were reviewed. More importantly, different concepts as well as developed models of higher education quality assurance derived from the literature were used as a framework for approaching and analyzing the research problem.

Qualitative research method was employed in the study as it was the appropriate to investigate the practices and procedures as well as challenges involved in institutional quality audit. Accordingly, data were collected by reviewing and analyzing different documents and conducting interviews.

The document on higher education proclamation that delivers the provision for the establishment of HERQA, and the subsequent guidelines and protocols developed by the agency related to institutional quality audit were analyzed in the study. On the other hand, semi-structured interview questions were used to generate data from four experts of the agency that had been working in the agency and had formal responsibility related to institutional quality audit. With regard to the selection of experts, all except one (unwilling for the interview) were interviewed as the total number of experts was within the scope of the interviewing capacity of the researcher.

The interview questions were formulated based on the concepts, ideas, principles, and practices gained from the reviewed literature. The interview was conducted with three of the experts via telephone by the researcher and the fourth was interviewed face to face by another interviewer trained by the researcher. The interviews were held in Amharic language, which is the official working language of the federal government. Data obtained through interviewing were recorded, transcribed and then analyzed by the eclectic ad hoc meaning generation method as presented by Kvale (1996).

While the general model of higher education quality assurance (see chapter 2 Section 3.7) was used in analyzing the practice, method and procedures employed by HERQA in

conducting institutional quality audit, the phase model was employed to a certain extent in analyzing the corresponding role of the agency. Besides, the employed definition of quality of higher education in Ethiopia and its intended purposes were analyzed against the concepts, critic and issues raised in the reviewed literature.

The study showed that the practice of institutional quality audit in Ethiopia was generally in line with the general model of higher education quality assessment. There is a national agency responsible for ensuring the relevance and quality of higher education institutions, and institutional quality audits were conducted based on institutions' self assessment report. Besides, institutional quality audits were made by external peer review teams composed of five members from the agency and higher education institutions.

The finding of the study showed that the agency has been highly engaged in the whole process of institutional quality audit: the experts of the agency constituted two-fifth, which is 40%, of the audit team; and the role of the agency was vigorous from initiating institutions to undertake self-assessment to that of the publication of the final result of the assessment. Although the academics were given the opportunity to be part of the institutional quality audit process, the study proved that there had not been any attempt by the agency in involving professional associations and other stakeholders in institutional quality audit.

The other important finding was that the result of quality audit of higher education institutions did not have any established link with funding, ranking of institutions or accreditation. Rather, the full content of the assessment reports gets published so as to be used by any potential user. In addition to informing the public about the status of educational quality of institutions, the results of the assessment provided recommendations to improve the level of quality of their education.

Although the guidelines and protocols of the agency clearly stated that the purpose of institutional quality audit is improvement oriented, the finding of the study showed that certain elements of controlling/accountability was also demonstrated. To begin with,

auditing procedures were highly standardized which both self-assessment and institutional quality audit were supposed to comply with; second, the agency had significant role in deciding when to evaluate which institution/programs; third, the initiation for institutional quality audit emanated from the agency; fourth, the result of the assessment involved judging of institutions about the quality of their education.

As indicated above, institutional quality audit has nothing to do with accrediting public higher education institutions. As a result, none of the public higher education institutions and the programs offered by them was accredited. Seemingly, it is also less likely that institutional quality audits would help to bring about sustainable quality culture and improve the innovation capacities of institutions toward quality improvement without primarily ensuring the minimum level of quality standard of education.

With regard to undertaking quality of evaluation, the finding of the study showed that there was not any explicit standard or criteria that were different from the ten institutional audit focus areas. However, although there were no explicit standards formulated by the agency, there were broad statements imbedded within the ten focus areas of institutional quality audit. In this regard, the study confirmed that the concept standard was understood by the agency equated with the ten focus areas of institutional quality audit.

The research also attempted to explore the challenges facing the agency in the course of undertaking institutional quality audit. As it was confirmed by the interview, while the first challenge was related to the rigidity of the financial directive of the government, the second was related to the lack of commitment of the leadership of some the higher education institutions to seriously consider the task of institutional quality audit.

6.2 Conclusion

Like their counter parts in other parts of the world, Ethiopia's HEIs had been traditionally monitoring their quality of education, particularly research outputs, in the form of peer review within institutions. In a similar way, as part of international developments towards ensuring the quality of HE, Ethiopia has also introduced a system of quality assurance.

The system put in place is generally consistent with the general model of HE quality assessment as presented by Jeliaskova & Westerheijden (2001). However, it is found out that certain differences also exist in the process of application of the model in the context of Ethiopia. Firstly, beyond its coordinating role, the agency has been actively engaged in institutional quality auditing. Provided with the limited human resource capacity of the agency, on the one hand, and with the rapid expansion of HE institutions, programs and fields of study, on the other, it is unlikely that such endeavor will help to cope with quality challenges in the country. Secondly, institutional quality audit in the context of Ethiopia is found to be broad and comprehensive which involves evaluating the scheme put in place by HEIs to monitor the quality of their education, teaching-learning activities, research and development, and other broad areas of inputs as indicated in the focus areas above. The decision to focus either on evaluating the system put in place to monitor quality, or focus on broad matters may depend on a number of factors. However, such an attempt may somehow gloss over the critical evaluation of each and every program.

Thirdly, quality assurance schemes may bring about incremental change in the quality assurance capacity and quality culture of institutions through time if and only if the fundamental basic quality concerns are addressed. In a system which is under transformation from elite to mass higher education and characterized by both internal and external dynamics, ensuring the minimum quality standard of higher education is of paramount importance. However, although the minimum quality standard of private higher education institutions is ensured in the form of accreditation, there has not been such a practice in the case of public higher education institutions. Whatever the form may

be, however, the basic concern of standard of quality of education needs to be addressed first. Otherwise, it is less likely that the current adopted procedures would help improve the quality of higher education in the contemporary competitive atmosphere of higher education.

6.3 Propositions for Further Research

In the contemporary landscape of higher education, the issue of education quality and its assurance are becoming increasingly important in Ethiopia. However, similar to their counter parts in the developing countries particularly that of sub-Sahara Africa, the system of quality assurance is still at an infant stage. Although there are scanty and minor empirical studies on the status of quality of higher education institutions particularly from the input side, there are no comprehensive studies with regard to quality assurance.

Thus, the author recommends that comprehensive study be undertaken on the general role of quality assurance schemes in ensuring and assuring the quality of education in Ethiopia in light of the potential impact of employed approaches in building the capacity of institutions so as to become competitive in the international arena. In doing so; first, the perception of different stakeholders specifically that of higher education institutions (leaders, academics and students) towards the significance and contribution of current schemes be investigated; second, institutional challenges towards establishing internal quality management schemes be explored; third, the functional relationship between HERQA, Ministry of Education, and that of higher education institutions with regard to assuring and ensuring quality be addressed.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide Questions

1. How do you describe the role of Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA) in assessing the quality of higher education in Ethiopia?
2. Are there any definitions of quality of higher education at the national level? How were they defined and who involved in the process of defining them? In your opinion, who had the final say in defining it?
3. Are there any standards or benchmarks used in auditing the quality of higher education institutions? How were they developed, and what was the role of HERQA in setting the standards?
4. What methods and procedures does HERQA use to ensure and assure the quality of higher education institutions? Do the methods and procedures apply to both public and private higher education institutions?
5. How are the institutions/programs selected for quality audit? And, what is (are) the role(s) of HERQA in the audit team?
6. Do you think that higher education institutions undertake genuine and critical self-evaluation of their education?
7. What is(are) the consequence(s) of quality audit results(reports) to institutions audited? And what is the role of MOE or the board in ratifying the audit report? How does the public be informed about the status of quality of education of institutions audited?
8. How are institutional quality audit reports prepared? What consequences do they have to the audited institutions?
9. In your opinion, what are the general problems (challenges) being encountered in undertaking higher education quality audit?
10. What possible recommendations do you forward to alleviate such problems (challenges)?

Thank you so much for your cooperation!!!

Appendix B: List of Documents Used in the Study

1. Higher Education Proclamation. Part Five. Proclamation No. 351/2003. Federal Negarit Gazeta.
2. Areas of Focus for Institutional Quality Audits. HERQA Publications Series-009 January, 2007
3. HERQA Institutional Audit Procedure. HERQA Publications Series-010 January, 2007
4. HERQA Profile. HERQA Institutional Quality Audit. HERQA Publications Series-011, January, 2007
5. Institutional Self Evaluation. HERQA Institutional Quality Audit. HERQA Publications Series-013, January, 2007
6. Preparing a Self Evaluation Document. HERQA Publications Series-015 January, 2007
7. Publications from the HERQA National Conference. Quality Assurance and Accreditation of Postgraduate programs. 7th & 8th June 2006. HERQA Publications Series-017, January, 2007